

Cohesion via Diversity and Inclusion: The Role of Sri Lankan State Universities in Post-War Reconciliation

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Abstract

The Pearl of Indian Ocean Sri Lanka experienced a brutal civil war that spanned over twenty-five years. Limiting the access minorities had to education and systematic anti-Tamil policies comprise the core of Sri Lanka's ethnic issues. Although the war ended, the bludgeoned history between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils continues to linger making reconciliation efforts ineffective. Although existing literature indicates universities as heavily politicized centers of ethnonationalism, the present research attempts to indicate how reconciliation processes can be augmented by adopting multicultural student bodies within state universities. To support this rationalization, a phenomenological qualitative research was conducted. Seven one-on-one interviews with minority students from three state universities representing the Southern, Central, and Western provinces of Sri Lanka were conducted. All data was verbatim transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Results indicated inter-ethnic cohesiveness despite the existing noticeable language barrier and discriminatory acts. All participants implied the ability to express cultural identity within campuses as a stepping stone to actively engage in learning. Overall, the informants' narrations were indicative of assimilation and acculturation to a common society. Thus, the authors of the present study believe in adopting diversity and inclusion within universities as an alternative mechanism to expedite pending reconciliation mechanisms to make a cohesive Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Reconciliation, Sri Lankan Minorities, Diversity, Cohesion, Multiculturalism, Intercultural Sensitivity.

1. Introduction

The majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils of Sri Lanka share a bitter past. Multiple populist anti-Tamil policies enacted by successive governments after independence from the British paved the road to a twenty-five-year-long civil war (Ganguly, 2018; DeVotta, 2022b; Russell, 2023). Although the war ended in 2009 and multiple reconciliation strategies were suggested, the divide between Sinhalese and Tamils stays unchanged and the grievances of the Tamil community remain unaddressed (DeVotta, 2022a; Deane, 2022; Gunatilleke, 2023; Rajah, 2023). Moreover, the discrimination of Tamils has cascaded into higher education indicating a culturally divided learning system (Sawyer & Waite, 2021; Ramasamy & Baniamin, 2022). In that sense promoting multiculturalism amongst students could address macro-level social problems such as lack of intercultural sensitivity by integrating diversity and inclusion (DI) strategies into existing

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administrative mechanisms of universities (Brown et al. 2021). Anti-racism and cultural awareness programs could further assist in establishing DI to improve the learning conditions of minority students (NADOHE, 2021). Implementing a clear policy on DI, thus, could foster intercultural communication and interethnic cohesion between Sinhalese and Tamil students. Accordingly, in this research, authors have spoken to 7 Tamil-speaking minority students in Sinhala-dominated public universities across Sri Lanka to portray the facilitation of DI as an alternative mechanism to strengthen the existing reconciliation mechanisms of Sri Lanka.

1.1. Background of the problem

Reluctance to ensure diversity and inclusion in Sri Lankan universities is the consummation of multiple populist anti-Tamil schemes enacted by the government of Sri Lanka (GOSL). Sinhalese Only Act No. 33 of 1956 was one of the first policies initiated by the GOSL to marginalize the Tamil-speaking community (Wyss, 2020; Deane, 2022). This policy made Sinhala the official language of Sri Lanka. For many Tamil-speaking citizens, this ethnocentric language policy resulted in career stagnation (Hoole, 2016). Similar to the Sinhala Only Act, the standardization policy in the 1970s was introduced to further reduce minority student representation in government universities (Wickramasinghe, 2012; Ganguly, 2018; DeVotta, 2022a; Amarasekara, 2023). The standardization policy while limiting minority students' access to education, also made minorities feel omitted and alienated. The overwhelming support such bellicist practices received by partisan politicians motivated Tamil youth towards retaliation against the regime. The rancor that continued to seethe between GOSL and Tamils made the University of Jaffna (UoJ) of the Northern Province slowly transition from a multi-ethnic establishment to a center of Tamil nationalism (Russell, 2022; Russell, 2023). Similarly, most other universities of the South followed in the same footsteps embracing Sinhalese nationalism. The resultant state of play between the two communities worsened in the 1980s. The hostility shared by the already divided populace reached its peak during July 1983 ("Black July") in which approximately 2000 Tamil civilians lost their lives (Ganguly, 2018). The same year, Sri Lanka progressed to a state of civil war.

The war continued until 2009 and policies for reconciliation were suggested. University regulatory bodies resumed placing smaller groups of Tamil-speaking students in Sinhala-dominated areas (Kirupainayagam & Sutha, 2022). Many minority students found it difficult to assimilate into a common Sri Lankan academic culture despite the efforts of the higher education regulators. Even with the facilitation of intercultural programs, Sinhala-Tamil relations within universities remain shallow (Sachithanandam, 2015; Eckstein, 2018; Ramasamy & Baniamin, 2022). Minorities still experience discrimination within the sphere of education (Duncan & Cardozo, 2017; Chandrabose & Logeswary, 2019; Herath, 2020; Selvaratnam, Keat, & Tham, 2023a). As a result, many Tamil-speaking students are either afraid or hesitant to actively take part in the learning community within government universities (Selvaratnam, Keat, & Tham, 2023b). Moreover, the Northern Province of Sri Lanka is still heavily militarized and civic involvement of Tamil students occurs under the supervision of the military where in some instances students are harassed and beaten (JUSTA, 2014; Thiranagama, 2022).

Further, reconciliation efforts implemented immediately after the war have not yielded positive results (Silva, 2018; IPID, 2021; Deane, 2022; Rajah, 2023). Although curriculum amendments are suggested (i.e., inclusive attitudes, multiculturalism, pluralism, etc.) efficiency of such procedures being implemented remains weak (IPID, 2021). Recent research indicates most school-level curricula advocate ethnocentrism (Cunningham & Ladd, 2018). Similarly, Sri Lankan campuses still harbor subtle racism (Eckstein, 2018). Furthermore, research on minorities is minimal as such discourse is generally discouraged (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2014; DeVotta, 2021). Although alternative policies are suggested to help Sinhalese and Tamils reconcile, none are appreciative of the Tamils' concerns (Ganguly, 2018). As Wakkumbura and

Wijegoonawardana (2017) report, reconciliation processes largely prevail unregulated and detached from national politics. However, research reports implementing inclusive and diverse learning environments helps students become self-aware and appreciate individual differences through successful interpersonal interactions (Peifer & Yangchen, 2017). Self-awareness could build empathy, patience, confidence, and efficacy in communities (Nguyen, Jefferies, & Rojas, 2018). Similarly, diversity could strengthen inter-ethnic trust (Bai, Ramos, Fiske, 2020). Diversity could also provide much-needed psychosocial support for youth which is an objective of the United Nations Peacebuilding Priority Plan for Sri Lanka (IPID, 2021). However, as Sawyer and Waite (2021) explain, diversity without commitment does not guarantee unconditional assurance of equality or equity. For instance, commitment towards diversity in universities can be displayed through a well-planned budget for DI (NADOHE, 2021). By demonstrating the benefits (i.e., cohesion) DI strategies bring to universities, the authors of the present study provide a policy alternative to post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This exploratory research is grounded in the social cognitive theory (SCT) that views human behavior within reciprocally determined relationships with the environment and the cognitive systems (Bandura, 2000). In this systematic inquiry, the researchers attempted to identify how minority students experience universities in relation to their behaviors and cognitions. For instance, displaying cohesive behaviors within ethnically heterogeneous learner groups is preceded by a decision-making process (Street, Malmberg & Stylianides, 2022). To succeed in such inter-ethnic interactions, the learner has to navigate an external environment at times may contain a myriad of hindrances. In that case, successful maneuvering requires agency and efficacy (Cannon & Rucker, 2022). This core theoretical proposition is utilized in this study to understand the narratives of minority students. Consequently, the findings of the present research are compared alongside SCT and other relevant literature to portray universities as a potential place to expedite post-war reconciliation.

2. Literature review

The malevolence between the Sinhalese and Tamils of Sri Lanka has been brewing since the time of independence. The problems are deeply rooted that it has affected multiple domains of governance. In the next sections, the historical context of Sri Lanka's ethnic problems, higher education in post-civil war, and the role of universities in expediting reconciliation by embracing DI are discussed.

2.1. Historical context of Sri Lanka's ethnic problem

The island nation of Sri Lanka houses three ethnic communities: Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims. While the overwhelming majority of the country is Sinhalese, the Tamils formed 22% of the country's population in the times of independence. Of the 22%, 11.01% was Sri Lankan Tamil and 11.73% was Indian Tamil (DeVotta, 2022a). As displayed in Figure 1, Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims are concentrated in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. The Indian Tamils are concentrated in the central hill country of Sri Lanka which is a combination of Central Province, Sabaragamuwa Province, and Uva-Province.

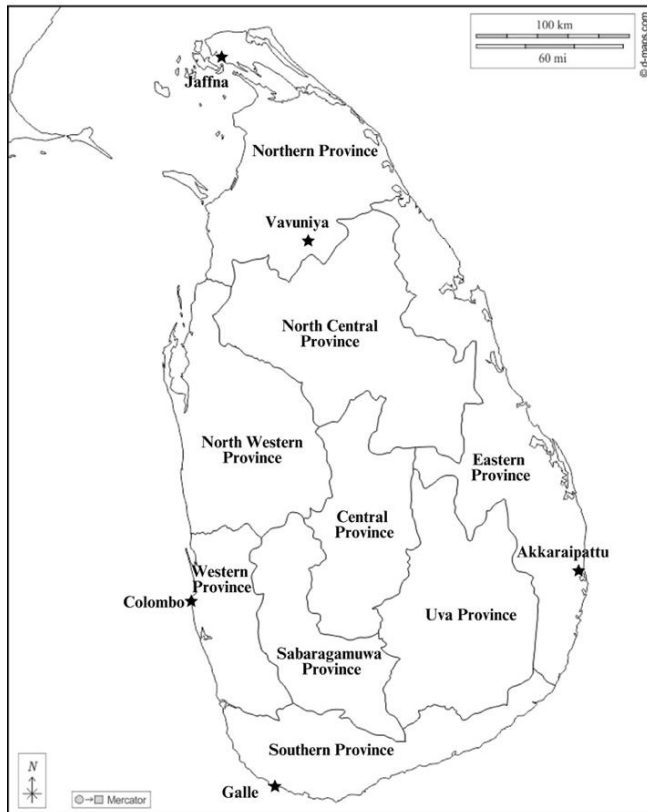


Figure 1: Map of Sri Lanka. Adapted from D-Maps (depose, 2023)

One of the initial instances Tamils underwent discrimination was the introduction of the Ceylon Citizenship Act No. 18. of 1948 where thousands of Indian Tamils were disenfranchised by the government of Prime Minister D.S. Senanayaka (Ministry of Justice, 2016; Ganguly, 2018; Venisha & Sreenivasulu, 2023). In later decades deportation of Indian Tamils continued with about 5% remaining in Sri Lanka presently. To this day, Indian Tamils remain one of the most oppressed communities of Sri Lanka with diminished access to education, healthcare, and restricted upward social mobility (Chandrabose & Logeswary, 2019; Srinivasan, 2021).

Similar to Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils experienced systemic discrimination which gradually turned into a war. It should be noted that, unlike the Indian Tamils, the Sri Lankan Tamils held key governmental roles during the time of British rule (Eelapalan, 2013). It is reported that in 1956, roughly 50% of clerical jobs were held by Tamils despite being a minority (DeVotta, 2022a). To increase the representation of the Sinhalese in government service and discourage Tamils in civil service, in 1956, then Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike enacted Sinhala Only Act No. 33 of 1956 (Ministry of Justice, 2016; Deane, 2022). This policy made Sinhala the only official language in Sri Lanka pushing Tamils further into marginalization. Following this bizarre, yet populist policy of Sinhalese nationalist politicians, Sri Lanka experienced two anti-Tamil pogroms in 1956 and 1958 in which approximately hundreds lost lives (Sri Lankan Worker-Peasant Institute, 1984; DeVotta, 2005). The majority of the deaths were Tamil civilians. Similarly, under the government of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the lady of late S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, another anti-Tamil policy named the standardization policy was enacted in 1971 (DeVotta, 2022a). Of the many implemented, the one that led Sri Lanka through a trajectory of internal conflict was the standardization policy (DeVotta, 2022a). During the 1970s Tamils despite being a minority were overrepresented in higher education, especially in medicine and science (Amarasekara, 2023). The selections were made purely based on merit and the implementation of the standardization policy was to eliminate the merit-based system and bring more representation to Sinhalese students

(Amarasekara, 2023). This intention of reducing the access to higher education for Tamils was once again a populist move to steer Sri Lanka to align with majoritarian politics. The standardization policy adopted weights to give equal representation to both Sinhalese and Tamils (table 1). While Sinhalese students gaining access to higher education is a good initiative, it removed the entry for many Tamil students who deserved entrance in a pure meritocracy.

Table 1: Medicine enrollment rates

University	Ethnicity	1971	2014	2019	2020	2021
University of Peradeniya (UoP)	Sinhala	229	187	183	184	201
	Tamil	250	5	12	25	15
	Muslim	-	13	9	16	11

Note: Frequencies displayed in the above table for 1971 includes medicine & dentistry of both Peradeniya University and Colombo University (De Silva, 1997: 116 as cited in DeVotta, 2022a). Statistics of contemporary times are retrieved from the University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka (UGC Statistics Report, 2014, 2019, 2020, 2021).

This policy of standardization was later amended by successive governments where new national merit quotas, district merit quotas, and quotas for disadvantaged or backward areas were introduced to neutralize the overrepresentation of Tamil students in science and medicine (Wickramasinghe, 2012; DeVotta, 2022a). Regardless of many changes implicated, Tamil students' representation continued to plummet up to the present times.

As the marginalization of Tamils continued to become visible, in 1977 another anti-Tamil pogrom took place (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2001). In some sense, this was a reaction to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) advocating a separate state for Tamils. During the presidency of J.R. Jayawardena, violence against Tamils burgeoned. A prime example of this is the burning of the Jaffna Public Library. The library housed over 90,000 books and a substantial number of palm-leaf manuscripts elaborative of ancient Tamil culture (Jayasuriya, 2018). As Jayasuriya (2018) reasons, burning the public library is an attack on the intellectual resources of the Tamil psyche. As this Sinhalese jingoism continued, more rifts between the two communities emerged. For instance, an anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983, The Black July terminated the lives of thousands (Uyangoda, 2007). The same year, the civil war of Sri Lanka started between the GOSL and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) where LTTE demanded a separate state for Sri Lankan Tamils. Slowly LTTE took control of the North and commenced using UoJ as a hub for military operations and to promote Tamil nationalism (Russell, 2022). The civil war that continued until 2009 was callous in which many Tamil students, professionals, and academics lost their lives. There were peace talks between LTTE and the GOSL between 2002 and 2006 during the time of Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe and President Kumarathunge; but, none were successful. The war continued until 2009 and on the 16th of May 2009, GOSL declared victory under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (Amrutkar, 2012; Athukorala & Jayasuriya, 2015). Although GOSL emerged victorious in the war, the Sinhalese-Tamil divide was never resolved (Soherwordi, 2010; Rajah, 2023).

2.2. Aftermath of civil war, reconciliation, and higher education

Although 14 years have elapsed since the war victory, Sri Lanka's education sphere is still under the wrath of ethnonationalism and majoritarian politics. The ethnic divide that got into the university system is still existing at large. The youths in many government universities still imply subtle forms of racism (Eckstein, 2018). In that sense, the animosity Sinhalese and Tamils have harbored throughout the wartimes may have contributed to the subdued racism and the noticeable language barrier within the universities (Wedikandage, 2014).

However, reconciliation is a practical possibility if universities are considered hubs for inter-ethnic interactions and cohesion. Although creating ethnically diverse universities is a realistic proposal, the governing authorities of Sri Lanka do not seem to take such inclusive policies into account. Most existing reconciliation policies are ambiguous (Silva, 2018). For instance, current university regulatory bodies deliberately place minority students in the North and East with minimal placements elsewhere curbing much-needed interactional diversity among student groups (Kirupainayagam & Sutha, 2022). Similarly, the allocation of professors and other financial resources is also controlled to a greater extent. As demonstrated in Table 2 below, despite having higher enrollments at UoJ, the number of professors compared to the University of Peradeniya (UoP) is disturbingly low. Through lecturers, students could obtain essential feedback to become useful members of society. For instance, when the clash between Sinhalese and Tamil students took place at UoJ, the vice chancellor of the same university conducted a training program on diversity for students (Sivapalan et al. 2019). Ideally, such programs should occur on a large scale to help students understand each other to develop intercultural sensitivity. It is questionable how universities could inspire youth to appreciate DI attitudes in the absence of resource personnel. What is further pressing is the minimal allocation of funds for student welfare in state universities (Asian Development Bank, 2016). This also could be a reason why Sri Lankan universities are heavily politicized (Russell, 2022; Russell, 2023). Brawls not just between Sinhalese and Tamils, but various other student groups within the same establishment are also common. The recent beatings of innocent students inside a canteen at UoP for opposing hazing by a student mob who advocated hazing is a prime example of violence that exists within government universities (Jayakody, 2022). In that sense, students require exposure to the diversity of not just ethnicities, religions, and languages, but opinions as well.

Table 2: Undergraduate admissions by higher education institution

University	Total Undergraduate Students	2018/2019 Total Admissions	Total Number of Professors	Total Recurrent Expenditure (In LKR millions)
University of Jaffna	10,783	3000+	31	3,508,365
Eastern University	5849	1900+	10	1,754,169
University of Peradeniya	10,311	3000+	196	8,780,568
University of Ruhuna	7734	2500+	79	4,649,231

Note: (UGC, 2019)

Diversity within universities can be achieved by placing more minority students in Sinhala majority campuses. This will ensure minority students assimilate into the bigger Sri Lankan culture. Despite the possibility of such positive assimilation, minority students continue to be underrepresented in most state universities outside of the North and East. As displayed in Table 3, student placements for two programs in two state universities still show a low percentage allocation for minority students. As per the statistics depicted below, the trends have been continuing with seemingly minor improvements. Lack of diversity affects Sinhalese students as much as it affects Tamil students as reconciliation requires both parties to live in good harmony with each other.

Table 3: Undergraduate admissions by ethnicity for academic year 2019 – 2021.

University	Stream	Ethnicity	Frequency (2019)	Frequency (2020)	Frequency (2021)
University of Peradeniya	Medicine	Sinhala	183	184	201
		Tamil	12	25	15
		Muslim	9	16	11
University of Ruhuna	Management	Sinhala	385	616	626
		Tamil	4	17	11
		Muslim	9	18	13

Note: (UGC, 2019; 2020; 2021)

Since minority students are primarily placed in the North and East, UoJ creates a different set of experiences than most other universities in Sri Lanka. For instance, North Province is heavily militarized where for every 12 persons there is a military officer (The Oakland Institute, 2021). Considering the occupation of North under LTTE for a long time, military presence is understandable. However, the unprecedented interference of the military in regular education-related activities of Tamil youths does not seem to assist in any way in promoting reconciliation. As Russell (2022) reasons, JU has transitioned to a mono-ethnic establishment that promotes Tamil nationalism in an attempt to retaliate against the anti-Tamil policies of the GOSL. Maybe as a result of this, university authorities tend to keep minority students primarily in the North and East to help them learn in their homelands. However, a small fraction of students who are placed in universities outside of North and East hesitate to actively participate in university activities with ethnically heterogeneous groups. Since prominent academics, rights activists, and politicians of Tamil origin were assassinated, many minority lecturers are also reluctant to actively take part in university affairs. Similarly, contemporary news reports minority student deaths due to haphazard behaviors of law enforcement authorities (Tamil Guardian, 2020). Moreover, the Sri Lankan army supervises all student union activities in the North Province. For instance, as Tamil Guardian (2019) reports, university students at UoJ have decided to support children of a nearby school by providing study accessories. Even in this initiative, the military intervened and distributed accessories for all students. Such interference continues to suppress the civic involvement of minority students. Furthermore, in multiple instances, student union leaders at UoJ were arrested, and in some cases, they were beaten (WSWS, 2012; JUSTA, 2014). In some sense, this shows how much involvement of Tamils in mainstream civic concerns is dispirited by the GOSL which directly hinders the progression of reconciliation. As Russell (2022) points out, continued discrimination and marginalization have pushed many Tamils to leave Sri Lanka. The worst is the fact that all these reasons have pushed UoJ to be pro-Tamil whereas, before the war, UoJ was one of the most liberal universities with an abundance of Sinhalese students and scholars (Russell, 2022). Overall, the transition of UoJ in retaliation to the policies of GOSL depicts the failures of a nation to enable appropriate intercultural communication. In that sense, to create a better learning environment, universities should focus on fostering inclusion and diversity that drives cohesion on campuses.

2.3. Role of Universities in fostering inter-ethnic cohesion through diversity and inclusion

To improve reconciliation processes, although assimilation is required, the lack of minority representation repels Tamil-speaking students from integrating into the mainstream Sri Lankan community (Yusoff, Sarjoon, Hussain, Ahmed, 2017). Further, as Pieris (2019) claims, minorities pushing for linguistic identity also contribute to the refrainment of such integration. What makes this problem further troublesome is Sinhala

students also starting to see Tamil students in a negative light due to their complete disregard for multiculturalism and inter-ethnic appreciation (Pieris, 2019). Considering the present state of play, authorities should take steps to ensure ethnically mixed student bodies within government universities (Eckstein, 2018). Moreover, commitment towards DI can be established within all universities. To depict dedication, universities must implement diversity in functional structures, curricula, and member interactions. While diverse student bodies bring favorable structural changes within learning spheres, similar changes should be incorporated within the governance structures of universities where the administration should indicate diversity (Holoien, 2013; Association of Community College Trustees, 2020). For instance, in the case of Sri Lanka, the University Grants Commission (UGC) should have a diverse group of individuals for administration. Administrators should continue to receive adequate diversity training which may include anti-racism training to eliminate potential unconscious biases (Peucker & Fisher, 2021). Similarly, to deliver curricular diversity, degree syllabi can be utilized to help students appreciate diversity (Holoien, 2013). Lastly, by encouraging inter-university involvement, interactional diversity could also be established. Additionally, equity in access, finances, and leadership can be incorporated into the university's mission and vision to display adherence to the good practices of DI (Association of Community College Trustees, 2020).

Moreover, establishing diversity at multiple levels accentuates the chances of students comprehending the commonalities between each other as students collectively encounter issues specific to each ethnic group (Peifer & Yangchen, 2017). This further convinces students to identify effective methods to engage in the campus learning community. As Su (2018) elaborates, students can master new languages when placed in diverse settings. For instance, if Tamil students of North and East can be placed in cities such as Kandy and Galle, such placements will enable students to master Sinhalese faster and build relationships with host families who provide them with accommodation. This could contribute to intercultural competence and enhanced self-awareness (Diego-Lazaro, Winn, & Restrepo, 2020; Nguyen, Jefferies, & Rojas, 2018). Accordingly, the authors of the present study believe increasing representation and continuous involvement of minority students in universities outside the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka can expedite existing reconciliation mechanisms. Additionally, conveying the reasons that may have contributed to the war along with alternative perspectives to students could also benefit the attempts of authorities to make Sri Lanka a pluralistic society (Cunningham & Ladd, 2018). Thus, Sri Lankan universities could focus more on developing inclusive curricula to actively involve students in a variety of activities that require inter-university interactions while creating ethnically mixed student bodies within faculties.

3. Methodology

The present exploratory inquiry was to demonstrate how placing Tamil-speaking minority students in Sinhala-dominated universities can assist in the overall reconciliation mechanisms of Sri Lanka. Following the guidelines prescribed by Azam et al. (2021) and Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2022), this qualitative inquiry was designed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The population of this study is minority students currently studying in public universities of Sri Lanka for at least a period of 1 year in provinces other than North and East. Tamil-speaking learners presently studying in the North and East were excluded from this study due to two reasons. Firstly, an overwhelming majority of the North and East primarily speak Tamil (Department of Census & Statistics, 2012). Secondly, the purpose of this research is to understand how Tamil-speaking students in general experience university education in Sinhala-dominated areas. Accordingly, a purposive sample of 7 undergraduate students was chosen from 3 public universities and a series of one-on-one interviews were conducted. Researchers' academic networks and collegiate support systems aided in the successful recruitment of

study participants. To ensure homogeneousness of the sample, in two instances, the participants were selected through the contacts of other university students who did not participate in this study.

All interviewees speak Tamil as their first language in which 2 participants identified as Muslim while others as Sri Lankan Tamil. Upon obtaining the signed consent, each informant was separately interviewed. While 2 of the students were met in person at a mutually agreed location the remaining 5 were interviewed online via Zoom. The researchers utilized an interview guide comprised of questions focused on involvement, efficacy beliefs, language problems, and recommendations of minority students. Pertinent literature such as Nguyen (2016), Young (2017), Eckstein (2018), Liyanage (2019), Russell (2022), and Russell (2023) were considered in the development of key questions for interviewing. However, locating empirical research on related areas was difficult considering the sensitive nature of the research. As a result, in some instances, research questions were developed based on published accounts of academics and students on news blogs and bulletins such as Fernando (2016), Kunarthnam (2016), and Kurukulasuriya (2016). Further, to eliminate assumptions, biases, opinions, and prejudice, the interview questions were developed to explore the lived experiences of all informants. Accordingly, the data collection was achieved by curating a semi-structured interview guide that consisted of 29 open-ended questions. The data collection process took place over a period of 4 months from September 2022 to December 2022. All interviews were video recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was performed as per the IPA guidelines of Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2022). First, all the verbatim scripts were read multiple times, and experiential statements (codes) were recorded. Then, the researchers reflexively developed experiential themes. A portion of the developed themes that help explain minority student experiences are elaborated in the findings section. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of all participants. The ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the Management and Science University (MSU), Malaysia.

4. Findings

The analyzed data provided key insights about how minority students experience the university, perceptions of the language barrier, discrimination, and perspectives on enhancing diversity. To further comprehend the individual narratives associated with study findings, the demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Demographic characteristics of study informants

Date and time	Participant	Age	Gender	Study year	District of Origin	University of Attendance
18/09/22: 03 PM	Melvin	23	Male	3 rd year	Colombo (WP)	University of Sri Jayawardenapura
9/10/22: 10 AM	Rameez (M)	23	Male	3 rd year	Ampara (EP)	University of Ruhuna
13/11/22: 10 AM	Rani	27	Female	4 th year	Jaffna (NP)	University of Peradeniya
15/12/22: 11 AM	Vaibhav	27	Male	5 th year	Vavuniya (NP)	University of Peradeniya
21/12/22: 10 AM	Lakshmi	23	Female	3 rd year	Colombo (WP)	University of Sri Jayawardenapura
25/12/22: 03 PM	Saran	23	Male	3 rd year	Vavuniya (NP)	University of Sri Jayawardenapura

28/12/22: 04 PM	Ashiq (M)	22	Male	2 nd year	Colombo (WP)	University of Sri Jayawardenapura
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Note. (M) = Muslim, (WP) = Western Province, (EP) = Eastern Province, (NP) = North Province

4.1. Student involvement drives inter-ethnic cohesion

Contrary to contemporary literature, minority students within Sinhala-dominated universities actively get involved in a variety of academic and non-academic activities. In many instances, students receive encouragement, and based on personal preferences students consider activities and programs that fulfill their aspirations. Rani, who is a 4th year medical student presently studying at the University of Peradeniya (UoP) elaborated on her experiences of taking part in the extracurricular activities in her faculty. She is originally from Jaffna. She stated, “..there are lots of extra-curricular activities. Almost all the sports activities are there. Both indoor and outdoor activities are there. So, there are a lot of opportunities for students to do extra-curricular activities on our campus.”

Although research literature is suggestive of a multitude of hindrances, the students interviewed in the present study indicated active engagement within the campus when opportunities are provided. Melvin, who is a 3rd year student currently pursuing medicine at the University of Sri Jayawardenapura (USJ) stated how he was able to organize and lead activities within his faculty. Melvin expressed,

“...we organized a game night for our students. I was in charge of creating the movie trivia session so I basically created a presentation and I discussed it with two of my friends to confirm whether it was okay or would it be fun to have it. So, we made the presentation and I was the one who coordinated the event and I had to get another person to work with me so there will be active involvement.”

Similar to Rani and Melvin, most other informants expressed continuous interactions with students within the faculties despite them being a minority in the university. A few students also indicated the role past experiences play in deciding one’s likelihood to engage enthusiastically with other learners. Although many expressed interest in working with fellow students, a few students from North and East suggested a reluctance while some feared participation. Ashiq, who is a 2nd year medical student from Colombo stated that compared to his minority counterparts from Colombo, students from the North are scared for some reason. “Many of them have fear. People who come from Jaffna, out of the 40 in our batch, 15 of them are from Jaffna. So, those children.... they have studied Tamil all their life. English is also very minimal. They are scared” Ashiq commented.

These fears play a critical role in collegiate networking. The bitter history between the two ethnic groups and the Northern Province being a central location of the war may have contributed to precipitating fear that fuels the hesitance. Despite the reluctance of some, encouraging students to take part in activities within the university can enhance the cohesion of all groups. For instance, Vaibhav is a 5th year medical student from Vavuniya. He presently studies at UoP. He mentioned that he was able to obtain good advice from his Sinhalese seniors to improve his learning experience.

“...as we spoke about sports there was one senior ayya (elder brother), he initially spotted me that I could do some sports. He personally gives us advice.... malli (younger brother) you can do like this.... then whenever even after doing sports when we walk around the ground he comes and goes jogging with me and I chat with him 2 days per week.... we chat and share our experiences. So, there was a good relationship between our junior and senior batches.

Similar to Vaibhav, many participants of the present study mentioned that active participation and cohesive behaviors within the faculties could positively influence their personalities and help them gain skills to lead. Lakshmi, who is a 3rd year medical student from Colombo explained how experiences within the university influenced her to be a leader. “.....It influences a lot because the experience we get from these activities will help us later in our lives when we make decisions in our career when we lead a team later. So, I think it is extremely important to take part in these activities and get the experience” Lakshmi narrated.

On close observation, the narrations of all participants strengthen the authors’ rationalization of using universities as hubs for reconciliation. The student experiences display cohesive behaviors and personal growth despite being a minority in universities outside of the North and East. Similarly, facilitating more interactive spheres for minority students helps ameliorate fear and provides them with a fresh perspective on being Sri Lankan. This will also enhance the assimilation processes much needed for reconciliation. As per the experiences of Melvin, Rani, Ashiq, Vaibhav, and Lakshmi efficacy in participation is influenced by past experiences. However, the nature of these experiences determines how the learner perceives the environment around them to engage in the learning community. In that manner, the theoretical framework of the present study helps authors portray the reciprocal nature of environment, cognitive systems, and behavior.

4.2. Language barrier and campus involvement

In universities outside of Northern and Eastern Provinces, Sinhala fluency is a key component that drives student networking. Rameez is a 3rd year medical student who is originally from Akkaraipattu. He presently studies at the University of Ruhuna (UoR). He said a majority of the individuals in his university communicate in Sinhala despite the medium of academic instruction being English.

“...mainly in my opinion majority of people are not willing to interact in English. They are trying to contact with Sinhala language and prefer their own language as well. Actually, the language has a big impact on minority students. Me, as I said, I have exposure only from school. I am basically not that much troubled by other Sinhala students. But, still, there is some understanding difficulty like slang words.”

Similar to Rameez, Saran also highlighted language fluency as a critical factor in pursuing academic pursuits in Sri Lankan universities. Saran is a 3rd year medical student at the USJ. He is originally from Vavuniya.

“I think fluency in both languages is essential for a person to get involved in such activities. Because when we don’t have fluency we can’t communicate easily with others and we will find it difficult to convey our thoughts. It will create a difficult situation to continue with our work. So, fluency is important.”

Although many students highlight the importance of language proficiency to actively participate in universities, such program that offers consistent guidance for students to master languages are not sufficiently introduced by authorities. The inadequacy of language programs to help students master a second language is noted as a major weakness in most government universities. While this inconsistent language policy limits student engagement and interaction, it further negatively impacts possible chances for Sinhalese and Tamils to understand each other and develop trust. While diminished interaction may curtail chances for Tamil and Sinhalese students to reach consensus and reconciliation, it also disrupts any existing or proposed mechanisms to promote DI within learning spaces. Lakshmi further mentioned instances where lecturers in her university mistakenly conducted lectures in Sinhala. While such instances of instruction show some disregard for minority students, it may also imply a dearth of minority representation and inclusion in government universities.

“....in our faculty, I am not aware of any such programs but I have seen lecturers conducting lectures...they start in Sinhala and when we inform them that there are students who can't understand Sinhala, then they continue the lecture in English but there are no specific programs to help these students.”

Deficits in communication are one of the major reasons for minority students to feel forsaken in academic environments if no one extends support to communication. Language assistance is crucial as the representation of minority students in campuses outside of Northern and Eastern provinces remains low. However, English is a viable alternative, Melvin said.

“....so, if you are not fluent in Sinhala, I think it is difficult to work with them together. Because at times you might feel lost if you don't know Sinhala properly....and as a minority student, I would say English is also important and that is an alternative to Sinhala. If you are not good in both then you will definitely struggle.”

However, the continuance of language problems perpetuates the trepidation minority students experience despite the opportunities given in the university to actively engage. Linguistic limitations further push minority students to remain within ethnically homogenous groups which in return could disrupt the appreciation students have for each other. For instance, Rani stated that she refrains from attending ceremonies and occasions in the faculty as most of the events are conducted in Sinhala.

“....other than this carrom, I was not in other cultural clubs because almost everything was in Sinhala. All the dramas and whatever they do will be in pure Sinhala so that's why I didn't go because I didn't understand that at that time. So, I didn't go much into those cultural groups but if there's any like welcome ceremony or something like that I actively go and participate.”

Even so, she still leads the faculty carrom team which suggests the acceptance she has received from the Sinhalese students. In that sense, establishing a clear language strategy within universities could remove any impediments to student interactions and enhance intercultural sensitivity. Diverse interactions help students learn from peers and colleagues; and, any program to improve intercultural communication of students should be learner-centric with the capacity to inculcate the appreciation Sinhalese and Tamils share for each other. Complying with the theoretical framework of the present study, the experiential narrations of Rameez, Saran, Rani, and Melvin display the reciprocal nature of environment, cognitive processes, and behavior.

4.3. Subtle acts of discrimination

While lack of a clear strategy may play a role in mediating subtle acts of racism and discrimination within universities, informant explanations are suggestive of macro-level social problems existing within higher education institutions (HEIs). For example, Rameez explained, “Actually...I came to the faculty in 2019 November after that blast incident. Easter attacks. So, they didn't show that out that much, but, there was some partiality within the students as well and a little bit with lecturers also.”

Rameez's experience depicts the prevalence of subtle racism in Sri Lankan universities which also confirms the findings of Eckstein (2018) about racism on campuses. Long-prevalled animosity between communities since 1948 could fuel racism in academic settings. However, Ashiq elaborated that discrimination is a result of the biased mindset that both Sinhalese and Tamils equally possess. Ashiq who is originally from Colombo also has received secondary education in the United Arab Emirates and he brings a neutral perspective to the present study. As much as Tamil students hesitate to study out of North and East, sometimes Sinhalese students share a reluctance to study in Jaffna, Ashiq further expressed. Such predisposition towards selecting universities based on ethnic composition impedes implementing effective reconciliation mechanisms in educational spheres.

“The wrong thing they do is sometimes, I would not call everyone, but there is...you know five fingers are not the same, so, I would not say everyone, but still there is very minute capability...they are like ‘ah president is Tamil no?’ they still have that mindset. A friend of mine... he is a Buddhist and he got Jaffna medicine. As soon as cutoff scores came, he asked, ‘Can I go to Jaffna without any issue?’ so, I mean that’s the mindset they have, I mean now he is doing well over there. But, it is that fear.”

These subtle discriminatory acts could escalate when the nation undergoes political instability. For instance, as per the experience of Rameez, Southern Province which is predominantly a Sinhalese-Buddhist region reacts harshly at times of social turbulence. Some of the recent riots in vandalizing the property of Muslims and boycotting Muslim businesses started in the Southern Province (i.e., Darga Nagar). Rameez’s narration highlights the precariousness of the situation for a Tamil-speaking Muslim student in the deep south of Sri Lanka. In that sense, the degree to which students in ethnically homogenous societies could appreciate diversity is questionable. On that account, Sinhalese students should also receive exposure to diverse learner groups as much as Tamil-speaking populations to expedite inter-ethnic sensitivity. This need for DI was pointed out by Rameez who explained the closure of a prayer room in their university following Easter attacks of 2019. “They allocated a room for prayers before the Easter attack. After the incident, I think they locked that room too. We asked permission for Friday prayers, Jumma, and permission was denied I think.”

Discriminatory acts similar to the ones Rameez has experienced are often carefully doctored by government proxies, Ashiq stated as he further continued to reflect on the quota system applied for university enrollments since the 1970s without a consensual solution in place. Ashiq opined, “Even if you take the intake, the UGC, and the Z score and everything, there is a proportion no? What the...40% merit is okay...out of the 55%, it is again divided into the districts. So, from that districts for that year, I mean the count is already determined by the government or whoever it is.”

The quota system is a clear indication of the negligence of authorities in ensuring minority representation in higher education. Considering the present educational landscape in Sri Lanka, students in universities create a favorable learning environment for themselves; however, the lack of a clear policy and favoritism dictated by political leadership continues to perpetuate the perceived enmity between communities. As per the informants’ narrations, students greatly benefit from inter-ethnic interactions. As a result, governments should capitalize on creating diverse student bodies to help students appreciate each other to gravitate Sri Lanka towards tolerance and pluralism. Accordingly, the present theme also depicts the reciprocal nature of the environment, cognition, and behaviors implying the possibility of inter-ethnic cohesion when heterogeneous groups communicate and interact.

4.4. Student perspective on diversity & inclusion

Despite the subtle acts of discrimination within universities and controlled access to the campuses, many informants of the present study explained that the opportunities are equally given to everyone once enrolled in a program. This is a good procedure to ensure minority students are included and represented in the university’s system. This provides positive experiences for students which further encourages students to take part in university activities. Melvin further supported the provision of equal opportunities within universities by narrating some of his experiences. He also highlighted attempts by the university to rely on English to provide a consistent learning experience for students despite minor discrepancies noticed due to the personal preferences of some students and instructors. “So, I think the first thing they are doing is they give equal opportunities to everyone so anyone can participate in any activity. They use the common language English. Maybe the students might use Sinhala, but, when it comes to academic activities it is totally in English,” Melvin expressed.

Vaibhav further explained how lecturers promote inclusive behaviors by encouraging the expression of cultural identities of minority students. Moreover, Vaibhav's explanation implies that universities have been adopting inclusive attitudes in recent times compared to the past. Presently, universities encourage minority students to showcase their culture which is a positive movement in getting all ethnic groups to appreciate each other and assimilate into a common academic culture.

"Until 2020, there were no cultural events organized specially for Tamil students in our faculty. There was Christmas, Vesak, but, there was no event specially for Tamil culture. We have a significant number of Tamil students...like....20 people. So, we were able to go to and speak with our dean madam. So, she understands that."

Furthermore, many informants opine that increasing minority representation and eliminating conversational deficits could enhance minority students' integration into a common academic culture. Some universities already have taken the initiative to teach languages to all students to remove the language barrier.

"As far as I know, the University of Colombo has taken the initiative to teach Sinhala and Tamil to students. So, they teach Sinhala to Tamil students and they teach Tamil to Sinhala students. So, they have taken the initiative, but our university hasn't taken it yet. I know most of my friends want to learn Tamil and they ask me what is the meaning of this and how do you say this in Tamil. So, they want to interact with Tamil people."

Similarly, some informants felt that bringing more students from the North and East and placing them in universities in the South could bring much-needed inter-ethnic exposure to minority students. Such exposure is vital to raise self-awareness, inter-ethnic competence, empathy, and many more (Nguyen, Jefferies, & Rojas, 2018). Moreover, placing in new societies gets students to interact with host families which helps students to integrate further into a common culture (Su, 2018). Saran further added to the already shared ideas.

"I think that will benefit because when they stay in North and East they can't get exposed to other ethnic group students. They will be exposed, but as they stay in their area they will speak in their mother tongue, they won't learn a new language. But, when they come to South, anyhow they will have to learn because when they even go outside to buy food, they will have to at least speak some words to communicate with them and get their needs satisfied."

Although university authorities seem to place minority students primarily in the North and East, many students confirmed that minority student numbers are slightly increasing in most universities across Sri Lanka. As per UGC data, in 2020, the minority representation is higher compared to 2019, and 2021 (UGC, 2019; 2020; 2021). Ashiq confirmed the existence of a similar trend in his university in the Western Province.

"Our direct seniors, minority.... they had 20 or 25, we have 40. As the time goes on, that proportion also keeps on increasing. Yeah, our direct seniors were 25, but when you go 4-5 elder to us there were only 5 people. That is 4 or 5 years before us, there were only 5 people. Now, even our junior batch, they still have not come in, but that also has around 50."

Increasing the representation of minority students, providing opportunities for minorities to express cultural identities, etc. are good initiatives to promote inter-ethnic cohesion and enhance reconciliation efforts in the country through government campuses. However, this is not the policy of all universities. Lack of consistency in policy was noted as a key concern for many of the participants in the present study. Thus, it is suggested that all universities follow a clear program to enhance diversity and promote inclusive attitudes throughout the university system to benefit all students regardless of ethnicity. Such benefits further affirm the applicability of SCT by demonstrating the reciprocal nature of

environment, cognition, and behaviors to support the authors' rationalization of using universities as hubs for expediting reconciliation.

5. Conclusion

Analyzing student experiences to a certain degree regulatory bodies still control university enrollments and placements. Further, inter-ethnic interaction within universities is still limited, but positive trends are visible throughout the system. Minority students who study in universities outside of the North and East are appreciative of the experience they have been receiving. Overall, the majority of the informants reported active engagement and cohesive behaviors in the learning environment. However, individual perceptions about historical events are a critical predictor of intercultural engagement within the universities. Most students display successful assimilation into the dominant university culture despite the noticeable language barrier and subtle acts of discrimination. In some sense, this research serves as evidence to show the degree to which minority students are appreciative of the opportunities that are given to them for cultural expression.

Similarly, participants highlighted having consistent policies established within universities (i.e., language policies, cultural expression, etc.) as useful methods to make students feel included. Moreover, placing Tamil-speaking students of Northern and Eastern provinces in Southern Universities was also suggested as a favorable method to get both Tamil and Sinhalese students to experience diversity. Accordingly, organizing more cultural/ religious activities and implementing systematic language training programs within the learning community could foster much-needed intercultural communication. Similarly, establishing these positive suggestions with the input and ownership of all stakeholders (i.e., lecturers, students, and administration) could help promote diverse student bodies to raise cultural awareness across university systems. Such acts could help everyone in the sector of higher education to be more appreciative of pluralism and multiculturalism.

At the same time, this phenomenological inquiry delivers a snapshot of minority students' perspectives on their learning experiences in Sri Lankan public universities. Secondly, student narratives and the resulting interpretations suggest strategies to improve the learning environment and be sensitive towards the requirements of minority learners. Thirdly, this research demonstrates the possible implications of expediting reconciliation in Sri Lanka by increasing inter-ethnic cohesion within universities by implementing sound DI policies. Thus, this research provides vital information in support of the capacity to help minority students assimilate to a common Sri Lankan academic culture and also for all ethnic communities to learn from one another. Accordingly, this exploratory study may be of significance to education regulators of Sri Lanka to implement DI strategies in state-owned public universities. Similar to the strengths, there are some limitations of the present study. The present study is conducted with only 7 medical students who are capable of communicating in English. The inability to find minority students from public universities who are adequately proficient in English was a major limitation in the study. Due to the nature of the research, some of the invited participants rejected taking part in interviews due to language difficulties and other personal reasons. For future research, inquirers may select a larger, diverse sample, and facilitate interviews in local languages to get richer accounts from students. In the present research, none of the researchers being able to communicate in Tamil was also identified as a limitation. Additionally, the fuel shortages and power cuts resulted from the economic crisis Sri Lanka experienced in the year 2022 also impeded access to students.

Lastly, this interpretative study is grounded in the SCT and displays the reciprocal relationships human behaviors share with the external environment and internal cognitive processes. SCT helps the researchers comprehend determinants of human agency and

efficacy to utilize the findings of the present study to motivate students and regulators to be part of implementing DI in universities. Thus, considering the universal applicability of the SCT and the benefits diverse learning environments bring to minority students, the researchers of the present study are confident in using universities as hubs to expedite reconciliation mechanisms.

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