

SRI LANKANS' VIEWS ON ENGLISH IN THE COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL ERAS

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the colonial era (1796–1948) of British control over Sri Lanka, the place and meaning of English have changed dramatically. During these stages, the language's impact on social status, education, and governance reflects the nation's larger sociopolitical changes. This study explores the ways in which class, ethnicity, and nationalism have intersected with English in Sri Lanka, utilizing historical, sociolinguistic, and political sources. It offers an understanding of the nuanced ways in which language determines both national and personal identity. The term "post-colonialism" has been defined and perceived as contentious by a number of writers in the South Asian context because of its linguistic aspects. The native Sinhala and Tamil languages were restored as official languages following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, but English has been the language of choice for modern government policies and procedures and has frequently functioned as the island's lingua franca. In the postwar era, these laws underwent additional changes. Most significantly, the 1956 Language Act made Sinhala Only the official language of the country. The contentious "Sinhala Only" policy of 1952 made it possible for the educated Sinhala population to rise to the country's administrative levels in the post-colonial era. The purpose of this study is to explore Sri Lankans' colonial mindset while paving the way for globalization via English language instruction. Even those who spoke the English variety known as Sri Lankan English were ignorant of its existence; it had developed covertly. The newly discovered identity may serve as a springboard for putting the English language in its proper context and gaining the abilities and information required to compete on a global scale.

Keywords: Colonial, linguistic culture, post-colonial, English education

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka and other countries that were formerly colonized by European kings have similar mindsets. A nation that was formerly self-sufficient and endowed with a wealth of arts and crafts that encouraged higher order thinking had its past irrevocably altered by colonization. A powerful state expanding its influence geographically over a lesser nation of people is known as colonialism, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Politics. It is inevitably linked to "imperialism," the process by which a state expands its domination and power by annexing new territory and seizing control over the political and economic spheres [1]. The function of languages varies greatly, as evidenced by a comprehensive history of linguistic empires [2]. During the era of European domination over the rest of the world, Western cultural and educational norms and languages were introduced through a confluence of military, commercial, and Christian missionary efforts [3,4,5]. The language was to be shaped as a social control tool, a standard in the home school system, and a tool for the colonial mission abroad.

Along with racism, linguistic hierarchization played a significant role in justifying the colonial endeavour [6] and is still present in arguments praising English's current supremacy in a number of nations [7, 8, 9, 10].

2. English in the colonial era in Sri Lanka

Throughout Sri Lanka's British colonial era (1796–1948), English became the primary language of government, education, and business. Portuguese and Dutch colonial administrations had previously administered Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon), but it was the British who officially institutionalized English, resulting in profound changes to the linguistic, cultural, and social institutions of the island. English was swiftly adopted as the official language of government and administration after the British took over Sri Lanka in 1796. English became the official language of law, government, and diplomacy when British

colonial administrators replaced regional political institutions with a centralized, Western bureaucratic framework at the beginning of the 19th century. English was swiftly adopted as the official language of government and administration after the British took over Sri Lanka in 1796. English became the official language of law, government, and diplomacy when British colonial administrators replaced regional political institutions with a centralized, western bureaucratic framework at the beginning of the 19th century. English became the primary language of communication with the colonial state because British officials, who headed the administration, used it for all legal and administrative transactions. It is undeniable that mother tongues are important, but we also need to recognize the necessity of a global language like English and its practical applications. We cannot access a world of knowledge or communicate with the outside world without English. English is still widely used today, but not as an elitist or official language imposed on the populace by colonial rulers, but rather as a significant worldwide language.

The Colebrooke-Cameron reforms, implemented by the British in 1833, restructured Ceylon's administrative divisions and established English as the official language of the government, courts, and other public institutions. English thus evolved to represent privileged status, bureaucratic dominance, and legal authority. English-medium education became one of the most pervasive effects of British authority. The main language of instruction in government-run schools and missionary schools was English, which proved essential for social mobility. In several regions of the island, schools were founded by missionaries, mainly from Christian denominations such as the Church of England and Methodist Church. English was taught alongside Western disciplines including science, mathematics, and literature.

English education was viewed by many Sri Lankans, particularly the urban elite, as a means of achieving greater employment prospects and social standing. Being able to communicate in English enabled Sri Lankans to work in the colonial government's administrative and clerical departments, which offered greater stability and income than more typical agricultural or artisanal jobs. A class division developed as a result of the formation of an anglicized elite made up of educated Tamil and Sinhalese families. Individuals who could read and write in English were given access to social status and benefits that were not available to others who spoke Sinhala or Tamil only.

The social difference was further exacerbated by the lack of access to English education for lower class and rural areas. Due in large part to the colonial government's emphasis on English-medium schools in urban areas, many people—especially those living in rural areas—remained deprived of the social and economic advantages that learning English could offer. English was seen by many rural Sinhalese and Tamil speakers as an alien language with little application to their daily lives, although being essential for achieving economic growth.

3. English in post-colonial era in Sri Lanka

Following Sri Lanka's 1948 declaration of independence, the language's significance was reassessed in light of the larger goal of nation-building. When the administration of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike passed the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, a big change happened. This law marginalized Tamil and English and established Sinhala as the only official language. Although this action was perceived as an attempt to revive pride in the Sinhala identity and culture, it also had unintended and complicated side effects. English speakers, albeit they made up a small minority, were similarly impacted by the diminished use of English in official matters, as were Tamil-speaking minorities who felt marginalized. The political axiom that "history is repeated" has been reflected in the position of the English language in Sri Lanka after independence. The English language, which dominated all fields prior to independence, began to wane with the country's declaration of independence, the enthronement of the Swabasha as the official language in 1956, and the adoption of the mother tongue as the primary language of instruction in schools.

English has resurfaced as a necessary ability for success in the global job market in recent decades due to the expansion of globalization, especially in industries like business process outsourcing, information technology, and tourism. As part of its educational reforms, the Sri Lankan government has encouraged the study of English in light of these worldwide trends. Nowadays, a lot of middle-class urban families place a high value on their kids' English language education. Even while English no longer has the same colonial connotations of power and dominance, many Sri Lankans now view it as an essential instrument for international communication and economic success. An attempt has been made to strike a balance between the national languages of Tamil and Sinhala and the requirement for English ability. Nonetheless, there is ongoing discussion about the place of English in society, particularly as it relates to linguistic equality and social mobility among the nation's heterogeneous inhabitants. English's status as an official language has not

diminished its significance in trade, international relations, or education. English continued to be essential for upward mobility in spite of the growth of linguistic nationalism, particularly in urban areas. English was no longer considered a language of government, but it was still a valuable skill because of its use in professional and international settings, even if it was more accessible to the upper and middle classes. According to [11], English is still seen as a “link language” that brings together various ethnic groups, especially in multiethnic areas.

Over time, opinions on English in Sri Lanka have changed, mirroring larger changes in the country's history, politics, and economy. English still has a complicated place in Sri Lankan society, having served as both a tool and a symbol of privilege and colonial power as well as a practical means of interaction with the international economy. Although nationalist movements originally opposed it and it furthered class divisions, it now acts as a connecting language and a doorway to opportunities. Its legacy is still debatable, nevertheless, especially in light of the current discussions around socioeconomic mobility and language equality.

4. Role of English language

Throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods, the English language played a vital and varied role in Sri Lanka. During the colonial era, English was the language of rule in Sri Lanka; however, in the post-colonial era, it is utilized for a variety of purposes. In this paper authors have depicted the role of English language in colonial and post-colonial era.

i. Colonial Period, 1815–1948

After seizing control of the island in 1802, the British instituted English as a language of great prestige and authority in Sri Lanka. The nation's linguistic laws and customs have been influenced significantly by the advent of English schooling in the 19th century.

- **Language of Administration and Education:** During British colonial authority, English became the official language for both administration and education. An elite that spoke English began to form as a result of it being the primary language of instruction in colleges and institutions. English encouraged cultural exchanges between western countries and Sri Lanka. It influenced local philosophy and education by introducing western literature, scientific knowledge, and contemporary views.
- **Societal Stratification:** The English language movement sowed seeds of societal division. English-speaking people had greater access to employment, education, and social standing than non-native speakers, who were frequently ostracized.
- **National Identity:** Nationalist groups that aimed to promote Sinhala and Tamil as emblems of local identity faced opposition from English speakers who see it as a weapon of colonial authority.

Significant English-language literature did not begin to be created until 1948, when Sri Lanka earned its independence from Britain. By then, there was enough of this writing to create a field unto itself. However, because the first English-language novel was published in 1917, Sri Lankan writing in English began far earlier than 1948.

Even while the English literature produced prior to Independence may not be highly rewarding from a literary-critical standpoint, it is nonetheless important to have some grasp of it in order to fully comprehend the literature that developed following Independence [12].

ii. Period after Colonialism (1948–Present)

Following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, English's status as an official language was diminished. The growth of Tamil and Sinhala-language schools was made possible by the Amendment Act of 1958 and the Sinhala Only Act of 1956.

- **Persistent Effect on Governance and Education:** Following independence, English continued to be a vital language in postsecondary education and in several government departments, especially those dealing with law, science, and business.
- **Globalization and Economic Opportunities:** English's significance in Sri Lanka's economy and international relations has increased as a result of its rising necessity for international trade, diplomacy, and communication in the context of globalization.

The post-colonial era has witnessed a drive for bilingualism and multilingualism, with initiatives made to

maintain a balance between Tamil, Sinhala, and English in public life. English still has a privileged status, nevertheless, which affects social mobility.

- **Cultural Identity:** While some see English as a holdover from colonialism, others see it as a symbol of modernity and advancement. This dichotomy still influences national identity conversations.

The initial effects of Chinese colonial rule on Sri Lankan society and culture were felt from the start of the sixteenth century. Over four centuries of colonization (1505–1948) altered the island's linguistic landscape and marked a turning point in the development of the nation's official educational system and language policy. Little is known about the linguistic practices that became connected to colonial control, despite the fact that a great deal has been published about the political and social dimensions of colonialism in Sri Lanka [13]. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to clarify the intricacies of colonial language policies and practices in light of the various settings in which British colonial power was exercised. The linguistic regulations that Sri Lanka's British colonial authority implemented in the nineteenth century merit. At that time, the issue of language became one of public concern. The colonial state's use of language in missionary work and governance grew in importance. As we shall see, communication problems were a major issue for all colonial rulers. Early in the nineteenth century, as British officials and missionaries discussed what kind of language education policy should be implemented, the issue of language came to the forefront. Throughout the era, English was frequently used as the official language of government, although initiatives to research and support vernaculars also persisted. Understanding the policies on matters like language in education and missionary activities requires a thorough examination of the colonial setting [14].

The opinions of various ethnic groups in Sri Lanka on the English language throughout an almost two-century period. Although a few studies have looked at English usage generally in Sri Lanka, none have examined the language's specific usage within the nation's major ethnic populations. This work examines the beliefs and perspectives about English that are prevalent in Sri Lanka today among writers, language planners, educators and learners, regular users and non-users, as well as elite and non-elite groups. In addition, the book looks at literature from three communities: the Tamil and Sinhala populations, as well as the diaspora of Sri Lankan writers [15] the use of English language as a tool of power during the colonial and postcolonial times

5. Resistance to English

Linguistic and cultural identity had a major role in the establishment of nationalism in colonial Sri Lanka. Nationalist movements aimed to restore Sri Lanka's sovereignty and cultural legacy, and English, which had become the country's official language during British administration, became their target. A major component of these movements was opposition to English, especially among the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, who saw the language as an instrument of cultural estrangement and colonial domination. This section explores the ways in which nationalist ideology and opposition to English changed during the colonial era and contributed to important shifts in language policy following independence.

In the early 20th century, nationalist groups used English as a focal point of opposition, despite the elite using it as a symbol of opportunity and development. The local people, who believed that English was isolating and replacing their own Tamil and Sinhala tongues, were resentful of English's cultural and linguistic domination. Nationalist leaders claimed that English was an imposition of colonial principles and Western culture, endangering the survival of Sri Lanka's native languages, customs, and identity. These leaders were mostly found within the Sinhalese majority.

Sinhala Nationalism and Resistance:

- **Sinhala Viharaya Movement:** The Sinhala-Viharaya movement was born in the 19th century in reaction to the perceived threat that Christianity and English presented. The significance of Sinhala language and culture was highlighted by this movement.
- **Donoughmore Constitution:** Sri Lanka was granted limited self-government under the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931, but English remained the official language. More protests by Sinhala nationalists resulted from this.

However, Sri Lanka had to confront the task of nation-building and reconciliation following the end of the civil war. Language is still a contentious topic, with nationalists from Tamil and Sinhala competing for acceptance and representation. To develop Tamil and Sinhala, the government has put in place a number of language policies. These laws have drawn criticism, nonetheless, for favouring Sinhala.

6. Views on English language

Sri Lankans' evolving attitudes toward English are a reflection of larger social and political changes. English was a privilege and power symbol throughout the colonial era, connected to the British Empire and its administrative apparatus. English was rejected during the linguistic nationalism-dominated post-independence era in an effort to forge a distinct national identity based on native tongues. However, opinions on English have changed once more in light of globalization. English is currently primarily viewed as a tool for economic growth, allowing people to interact with worldwide markets, pursue higher education, and take part in global conversation.

English was primarily seen as the language of the colonists during British rule, serving as a means of control over law, government, education, and trade. The administrative and legal systems that had previously been carried out in Sinhala, Tamil, or other regional languages were centralized by the British using English as a tool of control over the aboriginal population. Because of this, English came to represent authority, rule, and elite status.

Opinions of the Elite: English gave the urban elite, especially those in Colombo and other large cities, a means of achieving privilege and power. Having access to English-medium education at esteemed schools like Royal College and St. Thomas' College allowed for interaction with British authorities and the possibility of earning large government jobs. English was therefore seen as the means to both economic and social advancement. The class that viewed it as a "language of progress" frequently embraced Westernized lives in order to earn favour with the British government.

Perspectives from the Marginalized and Rural Communities: On the other hand, English was virtually unobtainable for the non-elite classes and the majority of rural people, and its prevalence served to solidify already-existing social and economic disparities. Those people had a far higher negative opinion of English because they saw it as a foreign imposition that prevented them from participating in politics and from opportunities. English was perceived as an instrument of exclusion, and individuals deprived of an education in English were essentially shut out of the colonial state's hierarchical system.

English never completely vanished from the political and social landscape of post-colonial Sri Lanka, despite efforts to downplay its importance. English was perceived as a colonial relic as well as a means of access to international diplomacy, higher education, and global trade in the latter part of the 20th century as industrialization and globalization gained prominence. In the modern day, speaking English is becoming more and more important for participating in the global economy. English language proficiency opens doors for Sri Lankans in higher education, technology, international trade, and tourism. English-language entertainment, literature, and media have grown in popularity, which has added to their significance as a component of global citizenship. The younger generation associates English more with modernity, opportunity, and upward mobility and less with the colonial history. Many people consider English to be an essential component of their education and future employment opportunities, especially in cities where access to English-medium education has increased.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, authors have presented the perception of English in Sri Lanka that has changed over time, moving from one of a language of colonial domination to one of global opportunity. English embodied the social division between the colonial elite and the rural people for a large portion of the colonial era, signifying both privilege and alienation. Nationalist groups opposed the English cultural predominance because they saw it as a danger to national languages and customs, especially among the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. After independence, nevertheless, English's usefulness for global communication, business development, and education started to change perceptions of the language. English now has a dual role in Sri Lankan language culture, serving as a bridge to global integration and a reminder of the country's colonial past. Maintaining a balance between the acceptance of English as a necessary language for advancement in the globalized world and the preservation of its native tongues is a persistent struggle for Sri Lanka. There have been several facets to the development of English in Sri Lanka, including changes in identity, linguistic influences, and sociopolitical reasons. It still has a big impact on the language and cultural environment of the nation, demonstrating the dynamic interaction between local and international influences. In conclusion, English has changed from being seen as a symbol of colonial power to a useful tool in post-colonial Sri Lanka, even though political, economic, and cultural factors continue to affect its function.

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