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Standardization and ethnocracy in Sri Lanka

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Standardization and ethnocracy in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Standardization was the scheme that replaced meritocracy in Sri Lanka education, with positive discrimination to increase the majority Sinhalese community's university enrolment. It did so by minimizing better-qualified minority Tamils' university entry, even as the quest for Tamil separatism was gaining ground. The government claimed the scheme was justified to create a more balanced representation in science-based university fields, but it was among the policies that contributed to the island becoming an ethnocracy. While standardization was later discarded, its legacy continues thanks to the district quota system it fostered and the inequalities it helped to cement between ethnic groups. Ultimately, standardization did not merely complicate existing inequalities; it also contributed to anomie and substandard professionalism within the educational and governmental sectors. A path dependence explanation helps us to better understand why the policy was instituted, and why district quotas continue to operate.

Key words: district quotas, ethnocracy, path dependence, positive discrimination, Sri Lanka, education, standardization, Tamil separatism

JEL classification: I28, I24

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1 Introduction

States resort to quotas and positive discrimination to redress socio-economic inequalities. Usually, it is ethno-religious minorities previously subjected to discrimination that benefit from policies addressing horizontal inequalities. In this regard, Sri Lanka's standardization policy stands out: it was a strategized scheme that sought to increase university enrolment among the majority Sinhalese community—specifically, Sinhalese Buddhists—at the expense of minority Tamils.

The good English-language education that took root during colonial times in the predominantly Tamil Northern Province contributed to Tamils' greater aptitude and preference for science-based studies, and standardization was justified as necessary to fix the attendant Tamil over-representation in science-related university fields. Tamils' disproportionate representation in the university system also led to their over-representation in the bureaucracy, a development the arid northern environment and its limited opportunities for upward economic mobility encouraged. The British preference for empowering minorities over the majority community—a typical divide-and-rule tactic—no doubt also played a role in this bureaucratic over-representation.

This justification aside, standardization piggybacked on anti-Tamil practices that germinated in the mid-1950s when Sinhala was made the only official language. This linguistic nationalism was the springboard that allowed successive governments to radically increase Sinhalese recruitment into the bureaucracy while systematically reducing Tamil recruitment (DeVotta 2004). In this overarching context, Tamils viewed standardization not as a policy designed to promote greater equality within the university system, but as another ethnocentric weapon designed to further marginalize their community (Hoole 2021: xxxiii).

Standardization benefitted many Sinhalese while undermining the prospects of relatively few Tamils, especially those belonging to the middle classes. But the latter amplified their grievances in ways that reiterated the state's overarching anti-Tamil posture and ensured that the unfairness associated with standardization resonated across Tamil society. With unemployment a major problem throughout the island, standardization was linked to the further aggravation of the employment prospects of Tamil youth. This was probably why it resonated so forcefully within the community, leading some to claim it contributed to Sri Lanka's civil war (De Silva 1974: 166; Hoole 2003).

This paper argues that while standardization may have been considered necessary to create a more balanced ethnic representation in science-based fields, it was also one of a number of well-calibrated policies designed to hurt Tamils. Additionally, the paper suggests that standardization was neither necessary nor sufficient to unleash civil war, although it strengthened separatist sentiments among Tamil youth, including those who would not have gone to university but who understandably considered the policy to be blatantly unfair and racist (Mclaughlin 2018). Standardization thus legitimized the claim that only *eelam* (a separate Tamil state) could ensure Tamils' dignity and enable them to fulfil their economic aspirations (DeVotta 2009; Tambiah 1986; Wilson 1988). Nonetheless, the extent of anti-Tamil discrimination was such that the quest for *eelam* would have taken place without standardization. Furthermore, the paper holds that while standardization improved the material circumstances of Sinhalese Buddhists, in doing so it furthered ethnocracy and helped to undermine professionalism throughout the state sector. Indeed, standardization contributed to kakistocracy—in Sri Lanka's case, rule by the most venal, most predatory, and least capable. Consequently, standardization in Sri Lanka must not merely be appreciated within the context of redressing inequalities; it must also be appreciated in terms of its undergirding impulses and consequences.

In what follows, section 2 contextualizes the island's post-independence ethnic politics, which led to standardization. In doing so, it uses a path dependence prism to locate standardization within Sri Lanka's ethnocentric trajectory. Section 3 evaluates why and how standardization was implemented. Section 4 considers standardization's legacy regarding inequalities and separatism. Section 5 concludes by briefly discussing how standardization ultimately did not merely disrupt Sri Lanka's educational sector, but also contributed to the anomie and substandard bureaucracy that have weighed down the island's prospects.

2 A path-dependent retrospective on standardization

South Asian scholars of democracy and comparativists in general readily acknowledge that Sri Lanka had the capacity to build a healthy liberal society. Notwithstanding some ethno-religious tensions beginning in the late 19th century, the country (called Ceylon until 1972) operated as a model colony and was therefore positioned to negotiate the unfolding democratic process successfully. It achieved universal suffrage in 1931, 17 years before independence and only three years after the United Kingdom allowed all its citizens to vote. While Tamils created some commotion a couple of decades before independence by calling for a 50-50 formula—that is, equal representation of the majority Sinhalese and all minorities—this demographically unrepresentative proposal was rightly jettisoned. By the time discussions pertaining to independence were unfolding, Tamil elites could negotiate with the British and their Sinhalese counterparts amid commendable interethnic camaraderie.

Unlike British India, which experienced harrowing violence during Partition, Sri Lanka's journey to independence was a quiet affair. As the British constitutional scholar Sir Ivor Jennings—who helped to put together Sri Lanka's first constitution, served as chancellor of the University of Ceylon, and consequently understood the island exceedingly well (Kumarasingham 2014)—noted a few years after independence, 'the transfer of power took place so efficiently that the ordinary citizen did not even realize that it had happened' (Jennings 1950: 202). Jennings also pointed to the country's potential to create a polyethnic democracy when he suggested that 'of all the new Asian countries, Ceylon seemed to have the best chance of making a successful transition to modern statehood' (Wriggins 1961: 314). Unlike India, where only around 15 per cent of the population was literate when it became independent in 1947, Sri Lanka's literacy at independence in 1948 stood at 60 per cent, while in the wider region only Japan outranked the island when it came to gross national product per capita (Wriggins 1961).

The decision to make Sinhala the island's only official language in 1956 marked the post-independence genesis of the Sinhalese-Tamil animus. Until then, English had been used as the only official language, despite over 90 per cent being unfamiliar with it. The fair solution would have been a policy of linguistic parity whereby both Sinhala, which the vast majority spoke, and Tamil, used by Tamils and Muslims, were made official state languages. But Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists came together to demand Sinhala-only, and Tamils were justified in feeling betrayed when the opposition led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and soon thereafter the government led by the United National Party (UNP), promoted Sinhala alone. Language is directly connected to upward economic mobility, and this is especially so when the state is the leading employer. Tamil opposition to Sinhala being made the official language was thus not merely rooted in cultural preservation—many in the predominantly Tamil Northern Province had begun learning Sinhala following independence—but was also associated with gainful employment and economic prospects.

Peaceful Tamil protests in support of linguistic parity led to the island's first anti-Tamil riots in 1956, followed by more rioting in 1958. When standardization was planned in the late 1960s and instituted in 1970,[1] Tamil youth were already entertaining notions of *eelam*. This is why, while standardization might be considered to have strengthened Tamils' quest for separatism, it cannot be considered a galvanizing cause of Sri Lanka's civil war. The conflict is considered to have begun in July 1983, when an anti-Tamil pogrom engulfed the island after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ambushed and killed 13 army soldiers. By the time the civil war ended in May 2009, over 100,000 Sri Lankans had been killed, with both Tamil rebels and Sri Lankan military personnel and officials accused of having committed war crimes.

The Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission put together by the Mahinda Rajapaksa government noted that 'the root cause of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka lies in the failure of successive Governments to address the genuine grievances of the Tamil people' (Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learned and Reconciliation 2011: 291). More than a decade after this report was released, the consequences of the language policies and standardization continue to marginalize and anger Tamils. These majoritarian policies will be hard to reverse, given the now embedded ethnocracy and—in line with path dependence—the increased returns that have accrued to constituencies among Sinhalese Buddhists.

Path dependence refers to how the timing of a particular policy and the sequence of events that stem from it unleash outcomes that can be very hard to reverse. As one author has noted, path dependence points to how 'once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice' (Levy 1997: 28). In other words, once you begin down a particular path, you will continue along it even if it leads to calamitous events, because reversing course is extremely costly. While it is not impossible to reverse a path, 'turning a nation, even a modest degree, is more like turning an ocean liner', and doing so requires 'strong decisions and allocating sustained resources to the newly chosen direction' (Shambaugh 2016: 128). Therefore, when countries do change path, this is often due to revolution, war, economic disaster, or some other traumatic outcome.

In the literature on path dependence, the way one decision or policy leads to another is captured by the idea of 'increasing returns'. As Paul Pierson (2000: 252) notes:

> In an increasing returns process, the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path. This is because the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time. To put it in a different way, the costs of exit—of switching to some previously plausible alternative—rise.

Thus, standardization in Sri Lanka is best understood not as a discrete event but as part of a continuous ethnocentric process that took root in the mid-1950s (DeVotta 2022).

As noted above, the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 transformed Sri Lanka and placed it on a path that was difficult to reverse. The UNP, which had led the way in negotiating independence from the British and had ruled ever since, realized this even before the 1956 election, which is why the party's leader, Dudley Senanayake, jumped on the Sinhala-only bandwagon. Both Senanayake and his SLFP rival S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike fully realized how much damage their unfair actions were

[1] Most associate standardization with the year 1971, when minimum grades were used for university admission, but Hoole (2003, 2021) documents that education officials embarked on the policy starting in 1970.

doing the country, but every time one of them sought to accommodate Tamils' legitimate grievances, the other resorted to 'ethnic outbidding' and portrayed his opponent as a traitor to the Sinhalese community (DeVotta 2004).

Thus, in 1956 Sri Lanka embarked on a path that even its opportunistic leaders would have preferred not to be on. But in line with the increasing returns argument noted above, reversing course or pursuing a different path would have been difficult, because continuing towards ethnocracy was politically rewarding. Despite knowing better, Sinhalese elites soldiered on, from superimposing Sinhala 'Sri' number plates on all buses—which led to the 1958 ethnic riots—to countering peaceful Tamil protests and satyagraha by militarily occupying Northern Province (DeVotta 2004: 126–29; Jeyaraj 2021; Vittachi 1958; Wilson 1994).

Other ethnocentric and specifically anti-Tamil policies instituted by Sirimavo Bandaranaike—who became the world's first woman prime minister after her husband S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was assassinated in 1959—included forcing Tamil civil servants to learn Sinhala in order to be promoted; requiring Tamils to negotiate in Sinhala with Sinhalese civil servants stationed in their areas; instituting Sinhala-only in the courts system, including in the predominantly Tamil north-eastern region, which Tamils consider their historic homeland; allocating little development assistance to Tamil areas, despite foreign aid earmarked for these regions; banning publications promoting Tamil culture from nearby Tamil Nadu state in India; and transplanting Sinhalese from the south to the north-east to promote Sinhalese colonization and alter the region's demographics. If the Sinhala-only policy led to more and more Sinhalese being recruited into government service, these additional policies placed the state on the road to ethnocracy.

Ethnocracy can be variously instituted, but ultimately it privileges one particular group by marginalizing others. While typically the group that benefits is the majority, this need not be the case. While policies associated with horizontal inequalities seek to rectify them in ways that cater to and better represent a diverse society, ethnocracy is rooted in domination. With those not belonging to the dominant group having little or no connection to the policies being implemented, ethnocracy enables group identity to triumph over individual choice (Howard 2012: 155). In short, in an ethnocracy, belonging to a culturally dominant group ranks higher than being a citizen of the state.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike's two governments (1960–65 and 1970–77) effectuated this process by transforming the bureaucracy from a professional outfit into a politicized, pliant apparatus. Thus, in 1963 the independent and dispassionate Ceylon Civil Service (CCS) was replaced by the Ceylon Administrative Service because CCS personnel were insufficiently sensitive 'to the spirit of the times' and the government instead wanted a 'more obedient, less intellectually inclined, and less argumentative' cadre that would do its ethnocentric bidding (Weerakoon 2004: 127). The 1972 constitution similarly disbanded the Public Service Commission—which ensured public servants were appointed impartially—and the Judicial Service Commission—which ensured the independence of the courts—and did away with the judicial review of legislation. It replaced these entities with the State Services Advisory Board and the State Services Disciplinary Board, which were placed under cabinet ministers, who thereafter controlled appointments, transfers, and dismissals and were allowed to operate outside the purview of the courts because the independent judiciary was considered a threat to the 'popular will' (Edirisinha and Selvakkumaran 2000: 103).

The 1972 constitution also codified Sinhala as the island's only official language. While the 1978 constitution also made Tamil an official language (and English a link language), by then the majority community had used the intervening 22 years to weaponize Sinhala to dominate all institutions representing the state. The new government that instituted the 1978 constitution also ended standardization but restructured the district quota system to benefit the majority

community. In doing so, it signalled the unfairness associated with standardization even as its district quota system 'gave standardization egalitarian pretensions' (Hoole 2003) and evidenced how hard it was for the government to fully pursue an alternative path that divested the majority community of its spoils.

3 Why and whither standardization?

What so-called standardization in Sri Lanka really represented was the state throwing out 'open competition' and instead introducing 'a system of weightage for the performance of different groups of candidates at public examinations' (De Silva 1997: 116). The policy was undergirded by political, social, and economic considerations. It had ethnic implications because it sought to remedy Sinhalese under-representation in science-based fields at the expense of qualified Tamils. But university-bound Tamil students were not unintended casualties. They were a targeted group whose over-representation in the university system the standardization sought to neutralize. Hence the weightage adopted for Sinhalese and Tamils in 1971, noted in Table 1.

Table 1: University admissions, 1971

Course of study	Medium	Minimum mark for admission
Arts, all universities	Sinhalese	187
	Tamil	170
Engineering, Peradeniya	Sinhalese	227
	Tamil	250
Engineering, Katubedda	Sinhalese	212
	Tamil	232
Medicine and dentistry, Peradeniya and Colombo	Sinhalese	229
	Tamil	250
Bioscience, all universities	Sinhalese	175
	Tamil	181
Physical science, all universities	Sinhalese	183
	Tamil	204
Architecture, Katubedda	Sinhalese	180
	Tamil	194

Source: De Silva (1997: 115).

Why did Sri Lanka institute standardization when it did? Several reasons contributed to the policy's timing, but its overarching basis was ethnonationalism rooted in majoritarian politics. Thus, while a youth bulge, unemployment, and egalitarian notions all coalesced to promote and justify standardization, the policy's undergirding impetus was majoritarianism, with Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists being emboldened by the successive waves of anti-Tamil policies instituted in the 15 years preceding standardization.

3.1 Youth bulge

In 1946, just two years before Sri Lanka received independence, its main ethnic composition was as follows: Sinhalese 69.41 per cent; Indian Tamils 11.73 per cent; Sri Lankan Tamils 11.01 per cent; Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims) 6.52 per cent. In 1971, these figures were: Sinhalese 71.96 per cent; Indian Tamils 9.26 per cent; Sri Lankan Tamils 11.22 per cent; Moors 6.52 per cent (Department of Census and Statistics 1996: 15–16). What was striking about the 1946 census was that the island's population had increased by about three million since 1901. By the time the 1971 census was conducted, the country's population had gone up by another six million. A hundred years before, in 1871, Sri Lanka's population had stood at 2.4 million; in 1946 it was around 6.6

million; by 1971 it was over 12 million (Department of Census and Statistics 1969). The latter rise was partly related to the control of malaria epidemics, leading to increased longevity amid high fertility rates. For instance, while life expectancy in 1946 for men and women was 43.9 and 41.6 years respectively, by 1962 this had increased to 61.9 for men and 61.4 for women.

The rise in the population coincided with the rise in education levels, thanks to the government introducing free compulsory education in 1945. This saw the numbers registered in primary and secondary schools rise from 867,000 in 1945 to 2,244,000 in 1960 and 2,700,000 in 1970 (Kearney and Jiggins 1975: 46). The more students there were who had successfully completed a secondary education, the more there were who wanted to enter university. Thus, while 38.9 per cent of those who had applied entered university in 1945, this figure was only 9.7 per cent in 1973–74 (De Silva 1977: 423), despite the number of university entrants having gone up. For instance, in 1945, just three years prior to independence, the number of university entrants stood at 1,065, but it nearly doubled in 1950 and then reached 3,181 in 1959–60. Six years later, it more than tripled to 10,423 (Jayaweera 1969: 286–87). At a time when the state was the biggest employer, university graduates clamoured for government jobs. This when the state was aggressively recruiting Sinhalese and marginalizing Tamils within the government sector. Standardization cannot therefore be evaluated unless we factor in the high unemployment prevalent at this time—and the state's burgeoning ethnocentrism.

3.2 Unemployment

As indicated above, Sri Lanka did a commendable job of expanding educational opportunities for its youth at primary and secondary levels. But this also increased the pool that wanted to enter university, which inevitably led to debates about rural-urban school facilities and ethnic intakes within specific university fields. These debates became more intense as educated youth sought employment: the more educated the youth, the more relatively deprived they felt when unable to secure stable employment. In this context, government jobs were the most coveted, and a university degree was the best way to secure middle- and higher-level government employment.

During colonial times, most Sinhalese had been content to pursue their livelihoods through agriculture. This was when a culture that emphasized learning (especially among its upper castes) combined with missionary activities in Northern Province and the harsh terrain to encourage Tamils to gradually gravitate towards government employment ahead of their Sinhalese counterparts. According to Donald Horowitz (1985: 233), the ethnic groups that benefit 'from opportunities in education and non-agricultural employment' tend to be 'advanced': with Northern Province ranking low in economic productivity, Horowitz classified Tamils an advanced group in a 'backward' region.

If the arid climate made the region 'backward', American Baptist missionaries played a major role in allowing Tamils in Northern Province to become an educationally 'forward' group. They set up excellent schools in Jaffna District that combined English instruction with superb science-based education, and this allowed Tamils to enter fields such as medicine and engineering in large numbers. Indeed, when the University Grants Commission published its second annual report, it noted that Jaffna District had 50 schools teaching General Certificate of Education Advanced level (GCE A level) science-based courses, while the much more populous Colombo District had only 42 such schools (Hoole 2021: 106). As Bryce Ryan (1961: 473) noted, it was not merely 'differential access to education' but 'differential access to English education [that] has been the crucial inequality of opportunity in Ceylon'.

The quest for education, and the aridity of the environment compared with the highly fertile southern parts, thus played a role in Tamils favouring public service (Samarasinghe 1984). Their

harsh living conditions, coupled with the status and job security associated with government service, made Tamil farmers especially obsess over their sons gaining positions in the public sector (Director of Education 1942: A5), and this was evident in the disproportionate numbers of Tamils who worked as government clerks (Ryan 1961: 474). The pithy Tamil saying 'even if your job involves looking after hens, let it be in the government's service' aptly captures Tamils' preference for state employment.

Sinhalese were well represented in the elite civil service from the beginning, but in the early 20th century many also began competing for lower-level government employment. As Ryan (1961: 465) noted, 'a high proportion of young people simply do not care what they do just so long as it is white collar and in government service'. With more and more youth acquiring a secondary education, even white-collar government jobs began to require university qualifications, and this too contributed to the policy of standardization (even though it was arts graduates who obtained most white-collar government jobs).

3.3 Egalitarianism

The Sinhala-only policy led to university students being able to take classes in Sinhala and Tamil in addition to English. This trilingual instruction took effect in arts faculties beginning in the early 1960s, but the science fields took around a decade longer to provide instruction in the vernacular languages. The marking of exams in Sinhala and Tamil by Sinhalese and Tamil examiners respectively led to claims that the latter marked papers less rigorously so that Tamils could enter university in larger numbers. The accusations were proven to be false, but those overseeing the imposition of standardization believed that the disparity in performance between Tamils and Sinhalese 'must be attributed to differences in equipment, teaching or marking and that standardization would counteract the imbalances in such matters between different media' (De Silva 1997: 116–17).

Students outside Colombo and Jaffna had few opportunities to study science-based courses, due to poor facilities and a lack of qualified teachers. Consequently, as university entry expanded, Sinhalese students became disproportionately represented in arts programmes. On the other hand, Tamil students were over-represented in science-related fields while being under-represented in the arts. Standardization freed up more places for Tamils in the arts, but as one Tamil scholar recently noted, 'it was a case of taking away something we prized and had earned, and giving us instead something we never wanted' (Hoole 2016). Table 2 highlights the relatively higher numbers of Tamil students that entered arts programmes between 1969–70 and 1977 as standardization practices became embedded.

Table 2: University admissions, total arts-based courses (including law)

Year of admission	Sinhalese no. (%)	Tamils no. (%)	Muslims no. (%)	Others no. (%)	Total
1969–70	2065 (88.4)	176 (7.5)	94 (4.0)	2 (0.1)	2237
1970–71	2226 (88.9)	187 (7.6)	86 (3.4)	3 (0.1)	502
1971–72	2073 (92.6)	107 (4.8)	54 (2.4)	5 (0.2)	2239
1973	2053 (91.5)	136 (6.1)	46 (2.0)	8 (0.4)	2243
1974	1934 (86.0)	226 (10.0)	84 (3.7)	6 (0.3)	2250
1975	1781 (85.6)	211 (10.1)	79 (3.8)	9 (0.4)	2080
1976	2071 (86.3)	208 (8.6)	114 (4.7)	6 (0.3)	2399
1977	2139 (85.8)	229 (9.2)	112 (4.5)	14 (0.6)	2494

Source: Hoole (2021: 74).

Nira Wickramasinghe (2012) has suggested that notions related to the welfare state, which the United Kingdom's Fabian Society and the island's 1931 Donoughmore constitution had popularized and legitimated, inspired the attempt to rectify a university education system that had shut out those from underprivileged communities and regions. Thus, standardization might be considered a democratic response by the state to rectify 'imbalances […] in society between communities and classes and to distribute entitlements in the fairest manner' (Wickramasinghe 2012: 83). This logic would be more acceptable if the Sinhala Only Act and subsequent government policies had not followed a path towards ethnocracy by the time standardization was instituted. Indeed, by 1970 the number of Tamils in the bureaucracy and armed forces had dropped to five per cent and one per cent respectively, compared with 30 per cent and 40 per cent respectively in 1956 (Economist 2016: 31). If we consider how standardization and attendant educational policies contributed to Tamils' marginalization throughout Sri Lanka, the notion that it was seeking solely to rectify a representative imbalance must be viewed sceptically.

This scepticism is especially warranted since we now know that individuals within the Education Department, led by the Secretary for Education, altered Tamil students' GCE A level scores in certain subjects so that they had to achieve higher scores to receive the same grades as Sinhalese students. In other words, not only did Tamils have to score more highly in certain subjects (such as medicine and engineering) to get into university, but the scores they received were also lowered by Education Department officials because of supposed discrepancies in exam marking. If standardization was an accepted way to account for different scores across different subjects, in this case it was only applied to Tamils and not to others. As Ratnajeevan Hoole (2016) notes, the downgrading led to lower GCE A level grades among Tamils in certain science-based courses, which made it harder for them to enter university and prevented those affected from securing employment in sectors that required good grades. Hoole (2016) refers to this as a 'double-barreled shot gun', as the government's actions had adverse consequences that went beyond university entrance.

Table 3 shows the total numbers of students from Sri Lanka's three main communities that entered university between 1969 and 1977. Fewer than 500 Tamils entered university during half of these years. Tamils' grievances centred on science-based programmes, given that these were where the community was over-represented. Table 4 lists the numbers of students from each community that qualified for all science-based courses between 1969 and 1977. Given that standardization adversely affected Tamil students who wanted to specialize in medicine and engineering, Tables 5 and 6 provide comparative figures for the same years.

Table 3: Total university admissions, 1969–77

Year of admission	Sinhalese no. (%)	Tamils no. (%)	Muslims no. (%)	Others no. (%)	Total
1969–70	2522 (80.6)	491 (15.7)	107 (3.4)	9 (0.3)	3129
1970–71	2805 (81.1)	524 (15.2)	107 (3.1)	21 (0.6)	3457
1971–72	2753 (83.2)	466 (14.1)	72 (2.2)	17 (0.5)	3308
1973	2846 (83.2)	483 (14.1)	70 (2.1)	21 (0.6)	3420
1974	2992 (81.9)	520 (14.2)	130 (3.6)	11 (0.3)	3653
1975	2882 (82.6)	479 (13.7)	120 (3.4)	10 (0.3)	3491
1976	3065 (80.8)	570 (15.0)	145 (3.8)	14 (0.4)	3794
1977	3228 (81.1)	579 (14.6)	153 (3.8)	19 (0.5)	3979

Source: Hoole (2021: 74).

Table 4: University admissions, all science-based courses

Year of admission	Sinhalese no. (%)	Tamils no. (%)	Muslims no. (%)	Others no. (%)	Total
1969–70	457 (57.7)	315 (39.8)	13 (1.6)	7 (0.9)	792
1970–71	579 (60.6)	337 (35.3)	2 (2.20)	18 (1.9)	955
1971–72	680 (63.6)	389 (33.6)	18 (1.7)	12 (1.1)	1069
1973	793 (67.4)	347 (29.5)	24 (2.0)	13 (1.1)	1177
1974	1058 (75.4)	294 (20.9)	46 (3.3)	5 (0.4)	1403
1975	1101 (78.0)	268 (19.0)	41 (2.9)	1 (0.1)	1411
1976	994 (71.3)	362 (25.9)	31 (2.2)	8 (0.5)	1395
1977	1089 (73.3)	350 (23.6)	41 (2.8)	5 (0.3)	1485

Source: Hoole (2021: 73).

Table 5: University admissions, medicine

Year of admission	Sinhalese no. (%)	Tamils no. (%)	Muslims no. (%)	Others no. (%)	Total
1969–70	112 (48.9)	112 (48.9)	2 (0.8)	3 (1.3)	229
1970–71	132 (53.5)	101 (40.9)	6 (2.4)	8 (3.2)	247
1971–72	124 (56.1)	87 (39.3)	5 (2.3)	5 (2.3)	221
1973	150 (58.8)	94 (36.9)	6 (2.3)	5 (2.0)	255
1974	184 (70.0)	68 (25.9)	8 (3.0)	3 (1.1)	263
1975	195 (78.9)	43 (17.4)	8 (3.2)	1 (0.4)	247
1976	158 (65.8)	73 (30.4)	7 (2.9)	2 (0.8)	240
1977	164 (68.0)	67 (27.8)	9 (3.7)	1 (0.4)	241

Source: Hoole (2021: 71).

Table 6: University admissions, engineering

Year of admission	Sinhalese no. (%)	Tamils no. (%)	Muslims no. (%)	Others no. (%)	Total
1969–70	77 (51.7)	72 (48.3)	- (-)	- (-)	149
1970–71	85 (55.9)	62 (40.8)	3 (2.0)	2 (1.3)	152
1971–72	171 (62.4)	95 (34.7)	5 (1.8)	3 (1.1)	274
1973	201 (73.1)	67 (24.4)	5 (1.8)	2 (0.7)	275
1974	223 (78.8)	46 (16.3)	14 (4.9)	- (-)	283
1975	241 (83.4)	41 (14.2)	7 (2.4)	- (-)	289
1976	204 (76.1)	60 (22.4)	3 (1.1)	1 (0.4)	268
1977	229 (79.5)	55 (19.1)	4 (1.4)	- (-)	288

Source: Hoole (2021: 71).

Ultimately, while there is no gainsaying that Sri Lanka's policy makers were dealing with many varied challenges and felt justified in pursuing an educational policy that harmed Tamil university entrants, one must not lose sight of the fact that it was a well-calibrated, state-created barrier to undermine the Tamil community. As Hoole (2016), a casualty of the policy, has noted, the purpose behind standardization 'was to keep Tamils out' of the university system—or more accurately, to limit Tamil numbers.

4 Standardization's legacy

The unfairness and outcry that standardization created (not just among middle-class Tamils, but also among their Sinhalese peers in Colombo) caused the system to be amended numerous times and very quickly: from (i) standardization to (ii) standardization with modified district quotas in 1974, followed by (iii) standardization utilizing 100 per cent district quotas in 1975, to (iv) standardization using 70 per cent raw marks and 30 per cent district quotas in 1976 (De Silva 1997: 116). In 1979 the new UNP government replaced standardization with a three-tier admissions policy, with university intake based on a 30 per cent national merit quota, a 55 per cent district merit quota, and a 15 per cent quota for those from 'backward' areas, which comprised around half the island. In 1986 the same government adjusted these quotas to 40 per cent, 65 per cent, and five per cent respectively (Matthews 1995: 80). In 1991 the island altered its university entrance system once more to admit 55 per cent via district quotas and 40 per cent based on merit. The other five per cent went to the 'educationally disadvantaged'. In 1979, the number of educationally disadvantaged districts was 13; by 1991, 16 of the island's 25 districts were considered educationally disadvantaged. These periodic changes amid worse outcomes evidence standardization's failure; but then, its pernicious consequences were clear almost from the very beginning. One of the foremost authorities on the policy noted as early as 1974 that 'both standardization and the district quota system have done more harm than good' (De Silva 1974: 167).

District quotas partly came about to inflate Sinhalese numbers in the areas surrounding Kandy in central Sri Lanka. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was from Kandy, and so were many leading figures in her government (including the bureaucracy). The proposal to introduce district quotas was a way to accommodate the Kandyan Sinhalese and those 'up country'. Under this system, university places were allocated in proportion to each district's population. This allowed those from Jaffna District a mere 5.54 per cent of the university places (De Silva 1978: 92). As noted above, the allocations were modified for 1974, which helped Tamil entrants, even though the number of Tamils entering science programmes was much lower than in previous years. When it came to science-based fields, between 1970 and 1975 standardization drastically reduced Tamil numbers (De Silva 1978: 93).

For 1976 and 1977, 70 per cent of students were admitted based on raw marks, while the rest were accepted based on district quotas. As noted in Tables 4, 5, and 6, this led to a dramatic increase in Tamil numbers on science programmes. But overall, the changes associated with standardization benefitted Sinhalese communities, especially outside Colombo, and disproportionately hurt the Tamils in the north.

The Sinhalese community determined whether a party won enough seats to come to power, and consequently, while all concerned realized the system was flawed, politicians and especially those within 'the Education Department were too conscious of Sinhalese pressure to yield to opposition and go back to "open competition"' (De Silva 1997: 116). This points to the increasing returns noted in the discussion above of path dependence. As more and more constituencies benefitted from standardization, it became more and more difficult to reverse course in ways that would minimize their gains.

This was again made clear after J.R. Jayewardene and the UNP came to power in 1977. Jayewardene's campaign had promised to jettison standardization, and this he did after being elected. But it soon became clear that Tamils were now going to enter universities in greater numbers than ever, which Hoole (2016) attributes to their having actively pursued higher marks to overcome the thresholds standardization had imposed. Sinhalese students and their allies took to the streets to oppose the new government's policy, and Jayewardene caved in, allowing all who

would have qualified under both raw marks and standardization to enter university. This led to universities accepting even more students while struggling to accommodate those already there.

The government's decision coincided with a 'job banks' scheme whereby each legislator could recommend 1,000 constituents and supporters for jobs within the lower echelons of the public sector. While most of these appointees were not university-trained, they were mainly from the majority community, and they joined the university-educated Sinhalese who were continuing to enter the bureaucracy in large numbers. The phrase *ape anduwa* (our government), cavalierly deployed against Tamil bureaucrats, captured this—although it could also invoke party affiliations. The ethnocentric zeitgeist aside, large numbers from the majority community within universities and the bureaucracy turned the claims associated with egalitarianism on their head.

Standardization and Tamil separatism are sometimes depicted as cause and effect. Robert Kearney (1980: 306) considered standardization a catalyst in the mobilization of Tamil youth towards separatism. Likewise, A.D.V.S. Indraratna (1992: 51) suggested that standardization had sown 'the seeds of the subsequent ethnic conflict'. C.R. De Silva (1974: 166) also suggested that standardization—and even more so, the district quotas that replaced it (see below)—'immensely strengthened separatist forces within the Tamil United Front [the brittle coalition of Tamil parties formed in 1972] and contributed to the acceptance of a policy campaigning for a separate state in early 1975'. This does not mean that standardization can be directly linked to separatism, because as noted above, several issues contributed to the Sinhalese-Tamil tensions that snowballed into ethnic conflict. Vociferous Tamil parliamentarians had threatened separatism even as the Sinhala Only Act was being debated in 1956, and Tamil youth in the north were discussing secession even before standardization was enforced. Indeed, the Tamil Students' Federation, which became the Tamil New Tigers and then the LTTE, was created in 1970, before the impact of standardization was evident.

In hindsight, the rise of Tamil militancy appears to have been most directly associated with unemployment (Arasaratnam 1987; Nithiyanandan 1987: 129). The 1969–70 socio-economic survey conducted by the government made clear that over 80 per cent of the unemployed were between the ages of 15 and 24 (Department of Census and Statistics 1973: 32), and by 1980 Tamil unemployment among youth who had passed GCE A levels was estimated to be around 40 per cent (Arasaratnam 1987: 460). By then, state policy had mandated that no more than ten per cent of Tamils could be recruited to work within central government (Samarasinghe 1984: 182). Tamil unemployment within the government was thus bound to stay low with or without standardization, although the policy clearly impacted on educated Tamils' job prospects.

The March 1971 Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front) insurrection, which sought to take over the state, highlighted the dangers associated with the unemployed Sinhalese youth bulge. Just as unemployment among Sinhalese youth led to the JVP insurrection, so unemployment among Tamil youth galvanized Tamil separatism. While the JVP was an almost exclusively Sinhalese organization whose rural ties appealed to Maoist ideals, it appears that its uprising inspired numerous Tamil youth (Nithiyanandan 1987: 129)—an influence perhaps evident in the leftist and Marxist orientation many such groups embraced. The quest for standardization had begun at least two years before the 1971 JVP insurrection (Hoole 2021: xiv–xv), but it no doubt pressured the government to accommodate the increasing numbers of educated and disadvantaged Sinhalese—just as it pushed the government to rapidly pursue radical socio-economic reforms (Russell 1978: 83–84). The insurrection forced the universities to close for 15 months, which provided the Ministry of Education with ample opportunity to use standardization to further the state's ethnocentric designs.

Among Tamils, standardization mainly affected the middle classes in Jaffna District, where most Tamils were peasant farmers (Cheran 2009: xxxiii). This partly had to do with the way that higher-caste Tamils had deliberately sought to prevent lower-caste Tamils from acquiring an education, especially on the Jaffna peninsula (Sivathamby 1984). The notion that an issue that was materially irrelevant to most Tamils would galvanize them into a separatist conflict should therefore also be treated with scepticism. That noted, those deprived of university entrance were among the crème de la crème of Tamil intellectual society or were linked to influential families in the Tamil community, and they could articulate their grievances as an assault on Tamil society. The fact is that Tamils had long placed a premium on education and government employment, and standardization directly struck at both those aspirations. It was with good reason that many among the brightest in northern Tamil society ended up promoting separatism, especially in the 1970s, although they were also among the first to flee overseas—especially after rebel groups began fighting each other and the LTTE embraced fascistic methods.

A more overarching way to appreciate the impact standardization had on Tamil separatism is to consider it among various other discriminatory government policies, which the two Sirimavo Bandaranaike governments especially effectuated. As one author has justifiably claimed, 'it could be said with no exaggeration that […] the widow [i.e. Sirimavo Bandaranaike …] was the mother of Tamil militancy' (Sivanayagam 1991: 40). The anti-Tamil policies associated with Sinhalese Buddhist majoritarianism were undergirded by an ethnocentric quartet: language, religion, employment, and education.

As noted above, the Sinhala-only movement deftly utilized the island's Buddhist heritage, and the language policies that were instituted allowed the state to boost Sinhalese employment. This—combined with the politicization of the state apparatus, and the foremost place accorded to Buddhism in the 1972 constitution—created an ethnocracy. The neutralization of the advantage non-Buddhists enjoyed in education, especially English-language education, was the basis on which Sirimavo Bandaranaike's first government had taken over dozens of schools overseen by the Catholic Church and converted them to government schools. Standardization in some ways was an extension of this attempt to minimize non-Buddhist dominance in the university education sector as part of a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist agenda, although it was also influenced by political, social, and economic considerations.

5 Conclusion

Sri Lanka's ethnocentric policies unleashed a civil war that lasted nearly three decades. While standardization did not *cause* the civil war, the conflict undermined Tamil education. This was because those most eligible to enter university were also those that had the capability to flee the conflict by moving abroad. This they did in the tens of thousands, so much so that now many students from Jaffna District enter university as beneficiaries of the district quota system.

Today, the 16 so-called educationally disadvantaged districts include all seven predominantly Tamil districts in Northern and Eastern provinces. Indeed, these two are among the four provinces (of Sri Lanka's total of nine provinces) that are currently branded educationally disadvantaged (Gunawardane 2021). If so many of the island's districts being branded disadvantaged points to shortcomings in Sri Lanka's resource-strapped education system, the plight of the predominantly Tamil areas highlights the costs of the ethnic conflict.

The district quota system appears to have helped those from disadvantaged areas to move up economically following matriculation (Herath et al. 1997). This seems to be true even among those

who specialize in the natural sciences, with one recent paper noting that district quotas benefit medical students from underprivileged households to such a degree that the displacement they cause in more privileged areas is justifiable (De Silva et al. 2021). That noted, at an overarching level, apart from certain programmes at specific universities, the tertiary education system in Sri Lanka is associated with low quality and a failure to prepare graduates to succeed in the private sector, for reasons ranging from a lack of skills in information technology and English communication to a lack of critical thinking abilities (Wickramasinghe 2018: 469–70). The system continues to produce an abundance of arts graduates who are ill-equipped for jobs in the private sector and who therefore get absorbed into government service, even when their presence is redundant.[2] This is hardly surprising, given that like much else in post-independence Sri Lanka, expanding university enrolment had more to do with political expediency rooted in ethnocentrism than with a quest to develop world-class learning.

Over a quarter of a century ago, Bruce Matthews (1995) suggested that an education system ought to build a middle class that would confront ethnic, political, and economic challenges while preparing individuals with professional skills to preserve a country's 'history, culture and religion' in line with 'its deepest values'. He concluded that 'in all these matters the Sri Lankan universities are failing' (Matthews 1995: 91).

Standardization is not the main reason Sri Lanka's tertiary education system has failed. The expansion of university education without the allocation of the necessary resources has played a bigger role in this regard, and this process began a full decade before standardization was instituted. But standardization's quota system only aggravated matters. As K.M. de Silva and Ivor Jennings (1990: 195–96) noted, the bloat associated with the quota system comprised students 'who were ill-equipped for university education and who failed exams regularly', who then vented 'their rage on the university system at large'.

The civil war, which would have come about with or without standardization, also radicalized universities and added to their challenges. The second JVP rebellion, which involved many university students, was tied to the 1987 Indo-Lanka Peace Accord, which saw Indian troops stationed in Sri Lanka, and which in turn was directly related to the escalating civil war. But the war stemmed from Sinhalese Buddhist majoritarianism. As Matthews (1995: 88) observed, Sri Lanka's deteriorating university standards 'are clearly linked to the world beyond the university'. To fully understand that world, one must appreciate the overarching ethnocracy and associated autocratic trajectory the island embarked on (DeVotta 2021).

Ultimately, it is not merely Tamils who have suffered from the politicization of higher education in Sri Lanka. The entire country has suffered. Ethnocracy and the politicization of education have led to compromised standards and anomie in both the educational and governmental sectors. While the Sinhala-only policy may have allowed numerous Sinhalese to empower themselves, especially those from rural areas, the elimination of English and the incorporation of standardization lowered standards and professionalism in various ways. The politicization of public service contributed to this immensely: people were hired into government service not because they were the most qualified, but because they were Sinhalese (and especially Sinhalese Buddhists).

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[2] Consequently, Sri Lanka today has around 1.5 million government employees, although the authorities claim that the state only needs between 500,000 and 800,000 to operate efficiently. While no data appear to have been collected on their ethno-religious backgrounds, it seems that over 94 per cent of those employed are Sinhalese. These figures are based on interviews with civil servants and on Ferdinando (2022).

The way Sri Lanka expanded its educational standards is commendable, but increased university education became linked to government employment. Today, one Sri Lankan in 13 is a public servant; at independence, this figure was one in 113. The nearly 1.5 million state employees suck up over 86 per cent of tax revenue (Ali 2021). Unsurprisingly, nearly 95 per cent of state employees are Sinhalese. Standardization and the district quota system are related to this outcome, even as it has contributed immensely to relative deprivation, especially among Sinhalese youth.

The Sri Lankan saga is one of sowing an ethnocracy and reaping an ethnic conflict. Many factors contributed to this tragedy, which began with the Sinhala-only movement. Standardization and the subsequent university entrance policies are among them. While there is no reason to claim that standardization and its attendant educational policies caused the conflict, the consequences stemming from them have made Sri Lanka a poster child for ethnocracy.

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