



The Role of social media and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Study on Facebook

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Abstract

Ethnic conflict is one of the contemporary era's significant problems. As Sri Lanka is a multi-cultural, multi-religious country, it has profound cultural differences between communities. As a result of those differences, many crises have arisen. People compete because of religious, ethnic, and language differences, while people maintain a close relationship with different communities as a part of the community process and their day-to-day activities. Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict introduced a new aspect that destroyed the entire nation for a significant period. In Sri Lanka, an unarmed conflict among different ethnicities has resulted in massive human rights violations, loss of human lives, affecting the country's economy, and destroying the environment. Moreover, the usage of social media in Sri Lanka is increasing every day. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are the most popular social media components, significantly influencing the Sri Lankan community's ideology and social behavior. Therefore, this study is aimed to identify the impact of social media on ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The prevailing condition of the study was analyzed through the literature review and in-depth interviews with 15 preceding significant social representatives through several vital questions. It has been identified that social media harms ethnic conflict, and hatred messages, provocations, and online chatter has been impacted chiefly on ethnic conflict situation on social media. Also, social media violence can intensify and translate to physical war in the future if not controlled. It can also be used to fuel already erupted violence, resulting in prolonged violence if not checked. However, the study concludes that social media can play a significant, positive role in preventing or reconciling ethnic conflicts and contribute to post-conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peacebuilding in the nation.

Keywords: *ethnic conflict, social media, dynamics, conflict reporting*

1. Introduction

Ethnic conflicts have surfaced as one of the world's most severe issues in the contemporary period. For a long time, ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka have been the most dangerous, critical, and contentious aspects of hostilities that have damaged the entire nation.

Sri Lanka's ethnic mix has been determined to be multi-cultural and multi-religious. The Sinhalese majority and minority Tamils, Muslims, and Indian Tamils as communities spread around the nation, and all individuals residing in a predominantly single country although



residing in the island as a different ethnic group. A country is a collection of residents united by a strong understanding of culture and national integrity aspiration (Huge and Watson 1977).

Countries are focused on stabilizing their ethnicities nowadays because of the range of aspects, beliefs, and certainties they share. Ethnicity refers to belonging to a person or community who embraces a tradition, faith, or language. "Nation" refers to a group that (Abeysekera and Gunasinghe, 1987) represents one or more recognizable physical features, such as historical background, dialect, faith, nationality, culture, and area; and (Abeysekera, 1985) is politically strangled and tractable to such strangling. Most Asian countries are presently conditioning, and ethnicity has become a crucial variable in the building and restoration.

As the number of media activities in conflict resolution grows, the need for more complete and worldwide awareness of this component and conflict prevention. Acknowledging how the media operates and the mechanics of military confrontation are both problematic and critical concerns to get this information because political dispute dynamics and the media are interwoven create a separate area of effects and possibilities. Consequently, although related events and studies continue to expand and accrue, the status of research on this issue today is still in its infancy.

Every dispute has a setting. A conflict's framework is a complicated phenomenon that differs from conflict to conflict. In this scenario, groups that do not relate or have a common goal participate in polarizing elements. Historical inequities, ethnic isolation, economic and social disparity, and other issues all play a role in the situation of Sri Lanka. These characteristics are frequently neglected for a long time and nurtured by people who live in a competitive and intolerable environment. Similarly, the social media conflict goes through the exact process and is not dissimilar, except physical aggression and brutal strikes; social media violence entails using heated words and dividing posts.

Social media functions in a virtual space, and because it is difficult to govern their use owing to their invisibility, we can only address the core problems. Historical disparities, an absence of impartiality in media exposure, ethnic-based politics, and economic inequities that exclude individuals of specific ethnic groups are the primary causes of ethnic animosity (KHRC REPORT, 2008). If social media conflict is not contained, it can escalate into physical conflict in the future. It may also be stoke already-raging aggression, which, if unchecked, can lead to chronic conflict.

Even though there is no research that strengths, initiatives, and reveals the effects of social media on ethnic violence, the effect of media on ethnic conflict is widely acknowledged, and "there is an arising presumption that social media may well be the most effective tool of conflict resolution and prevent future conflicts" (Howard, 2003:2). The ethnic division is used only when there is carnage and deaths. So popular current and solid social media via the media fruitful is done by effectively employing popular social media to spread innovative thoughts,



and communicative forms have gone out. This research was conducted to identify the impact of social media on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

1.1 Problem Statement

Sri Lanka has four major religions: Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism; most are Buddhists. As Sri Lankans suffered from the 30 years of war, the current ethnic problem among the Sinhala-Muslim community, making people back to the fear of a long-running future ethnic war. During this era, the news and information spread faster. People used to get plenty of information from various media channels. Social media became one of the essential news, information generating, and sharing media among these channels. From time to time, ethnic conflict-related incidents have become a major topic on social media, and much-altered information, news, and different perspectives are shared on these platforms by various anti-religious social organizations and groups. This research was conducted to identify the role of social media in ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Therefore the research focuses on the problem of "Has social media enabled new dynamics related to the ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka?" This research can be treated to fulfill the prevailing literature gap in this study area and identify the new social media strategies for crisis management.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to understand the new social media dynamics formed related to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The research objectives of the study are as follows:

Describe the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the role of social media.

Analysis & Obtaining knowledge about social media as a medium of effective communication tool in Sri Lanka.

Find more social media issues and facts regarding ethnicity in Sri Lanka.

Indicate the significant factors influenced through social media towards the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka

Identify new social media dynamics related to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

1.3 Review of Literature

Today, the face of the ethnic dilemma is not just a conflict happening between different ethnic groups, but it is a complex global crisis spreading across a complex extension. Therefore, ethnic conflicts have evolved as one of the world's major problems in the present context. Today, this global crisis is spreading on diverse levels and creating obstacles of its own. For many years, ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka have created the most hazardous, crucial, and contentious faces of conflicts that have damaged the whole country. That is why the studies on ethnic-related concerns have always been on the top to be conducted.

1.3.1 Understanding concepts of 'ethnicity,' 'Nation,' and 'conflict.'



The phrases "ethnicity" as well as "ethnic group" are derived from the Greek word "ethnos," which may have been rendered as "nation" or simply "people from the same community who share a common culture." Nations are concerned about stabilizing their ethnicities today because of the variety of disciplines, beliefs, and certainties they share. Ethnicity refers to belonging to individuals or groups who share a culture, religion, or language. "Nation" refers to a group that (Abeysekera, c., & Gunasinghe, N., 1987) shares one or more recognizable physical attributes, such as comprehensive religion, history, language, culture, national background, and area; and (Abeysekera 1985) is politically connected and computable to such compression. Most South Asian countries are presently conditioning, and ethnicity has become a significant variable in the building and restoration.

However, it is necessary to find out the definitions that clearly explain the notion of ethnicity to understand the contemporary. An 'ethnic group' is a collection of people who identify based on actual or imagined ancestry. This shared ancestry can be found on collective societal components such as history, rationality, country, nationality, religion, language, standard norms & beliefs, or physical appearance. Ethnic identity is indicated by recognition from others of a group's differences, and people of an ethnic group are also aware of their ethnicity.

On the other hand, the term 'conflict' according to Pruitt & Robbins, 2002 has been defined as a distinction of desire or the assumption that the individuals' current goals cannot be fulfilled concurrently through progressive engagement. Conflict can vary from mere dispute to a full-fledged war. William Wilmot & Joyce Hocker define the concept of conflict, providing a broad understanding of the term, highlighting communication's vital function. They explain it as an articulated battle between two interdependent participants who see divergent aims, depletion of resources, and disruptions from the other person in accomplishing their purposes. When members of a group might be intensely uncomfortable but not say anything, conflict can exist without being involved. However, how disagreement is communicated and managed are communication actions that are investigated.

In a modern context, the conflict has been extended and shaped to characterize any discontent that arises from practically any facet of social interactions. The fundamental, permeable character of making decisions over contradictory options may influence anything from politics to everyday choices like buying and serving. The term "conflict" has been attributed to family disputes, workplace squabbles, and violent confrontations between countries. Thus, it has been stated, "the differences between conflict and non-conflict are blurry at greatest and non-existent at worst" (Mack and Snyder, 1971: 3).

1.3.2 The Growth of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is one of the most prominent countries in South Asia exposed to terrorism for a more extended period. Several types of terrorist attacks, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), were created in May 1976, have influenced it, and it waged a violent separatist



movement intending to establish a genuine Tamil state in Sri Lanka's North and East. The LTTE's terrorist action directly pushed Sri Lanka into a civil war that lasted over 33 years and claimed many lives of both civilians and the military. It was one of Asia's deadliest and most active armed wars until the Mahinda Rajapaksha government in May 2009 conquered it.

Sri Lanka has a distinct racial community, Sinhalese 74% constituting the most significant majority; the Sri Lankan Tamils remain in the North and East, accounting for 12.6%, and the Indian Tamils who arrived in the 19th century to produce crops accounting for 5.6%. Muslims are the third-largest minority, 7.4%. The majority Sinhalese community, predominantly Buddhist, and the Tamil community, primarily Hindu, have pushed for a separate Eelam state in the Northeast. A brutal civil war ensued, lasted nearly 30 years, and claimed the lives of more than thousands of people.

Like other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka has a diversified population, which signifies a multi-cultural and multi-religious nation. Although there is a secessionist tendency in Sri Lanka, there are many other conflicts related to religious, cultural, and ethnic disputes among the people living in Sri Lanka. When evaluating the fundamental cause and effects of the war, it is essential to remember that the conflict began much earlier than we thought. According to historical research, Sinhalese have always attempted to dominate other communities, particularly Moors and Tamils. As a result, several conflicts have arisen in society.

Furthermore, policies advocated by Sinhalese leaders in post-independence Sri Lanka have been highly ethnocentric and have curtailed the Sinhalese. Tamils claim that measures such as the 1948 Citizenship Act and the 1956 Sinhala Exclusively Official Language Act, designed by Sinhala elites to build the current federal-state structure, disregarded the demands of the minor group. Sri Lankan intellectuals who were famous for their publishing in the field of ethnicity and conflict, such as Dharmadasa (1992), Jayewardene and Uyangoda (1986), Rajanayagam (1986), and Wickeremeratne (1995), recognized Tamil's dissatisfaction and described the Sinhala political class's motivations for enacting such nationalistic measures. According to their views, the country's conflict has escalated significantly because of Sinhalese continuing to feel financially treated differentially and put aside by the other communities. This disagreement caused one party to accuse the other of abusing official power, state etiquette, and ruling elite-based institutions. Similarly, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has several core reasons, roots, and repercussions that are inextricably linked.

1.3.3 The Root Causes of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has several core causes and consequences that are all intertwined. The Sri Lankan war has escalated significantly because the Sinhalese continue to feel against financially discriminated. One group charges the other of governing the elite-based institutions and enjoying power in the bureaucracy and government patronage. When the economic advantages are the result of hard labor, demand for state divisions decreases;

however, given the intricacy of the situation, it should not be considered that these reasons are the result of independently born historical processes in which one incidence led to another.

Many of the difficulties that may be termed root causes originated inside a single but broad setting, and equally as frequently, simultaneously. Language education policy may be found mainly in the framework of ethnic politics. However, these topics must be distinguished as distinctive themes that would appear in any evaluation of the Sri Lankan war.

1.3.4 Positioning Muslims in Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

The Muslims in Sri Lanka, one of the ethnic groups, were seriously impacted by colonial rule, ethnonationalism, and ethnic violence. The Sinhalese and Tamils are also seriously impacted by ethnic strife and civil conflict, have historical roots, and, as an essential part of the Sri Lankan nation, have attempted to safeguard the islands' peaceful coexist integrity of the island country. However, their issues deflected throughout civilization. As Jezeema Ismail points out, historians may have overlooked it since it was a close partnership (Ismail, 2013).

Over the last decades, an exceptional degree of violent attacks, protests, and hateful speech was directed towards Sri Lanka's 10% Muslim minority. The attacks, which Buddhist extremist groups mainly conducted, have left the country's second-biggest minority population, Muslims, feeling fearful and insecure. The Government of Sri Lanka's reaction has been minimal. In certain situations, police delay has allowed violence to occur, and there have been few investigations.

The principal group driving the attacking of Muslims is the 'Bodu Bala Sena,' or 'Buddhist power force.' Efforts of Muslim society to the Government of Sri Lanka to take measures against such an organization have received slight support. The BBS sees itself as the identity protector of "nation, ethnicity, and religion" (Rata, Jaathiya, Agama). It also appoints itself as an unofficial legislation body in situations where the country's law courts are responsible (Sunday Times: 2014).

Even though Muslim members of parliament have brought the concerns to the President of Sri Lanka's recognition, some Buddhist radical elements of the Bodu Bala Sena, Sihala Ravaya, and Ravana Balakaya organizations have progressed their campaign of harassment, threats of violence, and dangers against Muslims (Colombo Telegraph: 2014). The administration has not taken any fruitful measures.

1.3.5 Conflict Dynamics and the Media

The media has always been in the grip of the elite. They might be controlled by the government or by wealthy individuals. The powerful typically maintain the status quo. As a result, in many situations, the media fall short of fulfilling their function as an essential gatekeeper and watchdog, a position that would be even more crucial in regimes where there are few



safeguards between various institutions and power is centralized in a few people. The powerful are uninterested in the dissemination of crucial or unfavorable information.

Communication has become much more versatile as a result of new technology. Cyberspace space, which has added a new dimension to the general use of technology and information in daily life, has created a new space for involvement. The space formed by the worldwide network, i.e., the Internet, is referred to as electronic space. Linking individuals have become simpler than ever before, thanks to the Internet. Internet space provided a new platform for individuals to establish groups in one location to exchange ideas for growth and strengthen their traditions and culture.

While civilizations throughout the globe cherish their distinct cultures, values, and conventions, social media connects individuals from all over the universe despite differences or geographical borders. "The contraction of space-time, due to the confluence of new media and globalization, has condensed the globe into a much more conservative interaction area," states Chen and Zhang (2010).

However, social networking platforms are not without flaws. Social media is frequently used to disseminate erroneous rumors and half-truths, and it may also be used to motivate individuals to perform violent acts. As a result, traditional and new media are utilized to intensify or de-escalate disputes. While mobile phones may help identify and communicate dangers, they can also be a powerful tool for mobilizing individuals to "protect" themselves and perform violent acts.

Even though there is no research that entities, policies, and reveals the influence of the media on ethnic conflict, the impact of the media on ethnic conflict is commonly acknowledged upon, and "there is an evolving conviction that the media may well be the most efficient way of resolving conflicts and avoid future conflicts" (Howard, 2003:2). As a result, "Almost all recent post-conflict national reconciliation attempts have incorporated media programs" (Kalathil et al., 2008).

1.4 Hypothesis

It was predicted that social media had enabled new dynamics for the ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka.

2. Research Methodology

For this study, the primary and secondary source has been used to collect data. Social media were used as a primary source to identify the powerful impact and dynamics of the present ethnicity in Sri Lanka; written and unwritten sources were used as secondary sources such as the archives, library references, textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines, the Internet



resources, archives from social media networks, the unwritten lectures, encyclopedias, and dictionaries.

In this study, the researcher systematically planned to solve the problem through qualitative research, in-depth interviews with field expertise. An in-depth interview with 15 interviewees was also taken from the admins of the Facebook religious groups, field expertise, media heads, academics/ scholars/ professors/lecturers, the social organization representing members, lawyers, pressure group members, and significant religious representatives. The prevailing condition of the study was analyzed by interviewing the preceding significant representatives. These interviews were conducted with participants with face-to-face and over-the-phone Q&A and discussions.

Qualitative results were drawn from fifteen semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews conducted between June 2019 and June 2020. The interviews were conducted with the representatives of the different sectors. In consequence of some of the interviewees related to religious Facebook pages and social organizations, it was decided to keep their name and their group or organization's name anonymous.

3. Findings

This study has offered insights into the recent surge in ethno-nationalist and anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka by examining the recent Sinhala-Muslim ethnic conflicts incidents surged between Sri Lankan social media users. The ethnography shows that ethnic conflict is an ideological difference that could lead to harm or violence. Racial conflicts are a common nature of human society, which is a combination of race and caste.

When analyzing the critics' opinions, it was identified that rather than resolving the conflict, the media plays a role in aggravating them. Similarly, interviewees emphasized that it cannot be concluded that only the media was responsible for the prevailing Sinhala Muslim ethnic dynamism. However, they note that there is a high tendency of media being used as a tool for it. Commenting further, one critic stated that media is not contributing to Sinhala - Muslim ethnic dynamism, but economic and political factors have also influenced it. Also, almost all the interviewees stated that any government now would use religion or nationalism for their political survival. Also, due to socio-economic factors, inequality in politics, and the policy of treating them as two separate ethnicities, Sinhala Muslim ethnic dynamism has emerged.

The interviewees believe that it is clear that the Muslim community emerging as the oppressed party of the racial conflict is a recent development. They point out that several incidents that have repeatedly occurred recently have brought the Sinhala Muslim ethnic dynamism into the limelight. The critics' opinion is that the Sinhala-Muslim ethnic dynamism that emerged in Sri Lanka has a racist base and a religious racist base. There is an opinion among the masses that Muslim extremism exists in the country, and it is the responsibility of a religious and social organization to build an ideology against it.



Even though the Tamils in the North pursued an armed movement using a separate identity, the Muslims could not do so due to their scattered living nature. The military expansion in Sri Lanka does not allow such a situation to emerge. Even if there were an attempt to organize, it would not be successful. There should be a demand for any social movement. Even though such demand exists among Muslims in the East, there is no demand for terrorism in the majority of Muslim society. Also, most of the interviewees agreed that tensions could lead to other kinds of hostilities like cyber concentration and occasional violence.

However, the ethnography shows that social media, particularly Facebook, can influence Sinhala - Muslim ethnic dynamism, as the users have not recognized the potential of using social media. As social media can grasp instantly and spread rapidly among society, the problems are portrayed differently. The general view is that neither Sinhalese nor Muslims will attempt to initiate a war in the future.

4. Discussion

The research findings indicated that social media negatively impact ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the government must be concerned about the misleading information and the hatred news spreading on social media platforms to destroy the conflicts against ethics and religious peace in Sri Lanka. Unless there are more conflicts between religions and ethnic groups, they can occur soon. The impact of social media has negatively influenced social behavior, and the author suggests that the government should control the way of using social media in Sri Lanka.

Recent ethnic conflicts show that the country has fallen into bloodshed once again. Mosques and Muslim-owned stores were burned down, and citizens were assaulted in public. The anti-Muslim sentiment was expressed in other racial minorities as well. As our respondents stated, Sri Lanka needs a well-planned alert system for conflict, rioting, and ethnic violence. In a society where such violence is all too regular, it makes no sense to react to every instance of violence as if it were unusual. A strategy would guarantee that a country like Sri Lanka, which is trying to recover from a centuries prolonged civil war with many untreated scars, could react to recurrent conflicts to preserve human rights, democracy, and social unity.

This study has explored how social media contributes to the Sinhala-Muslim conflict in Sri Lanka. This study helps establish new standards about being Sinhalese and Muslims and motivates participants to see the world through a particular perspective. Social media not only reflects 'what is out there,' but it also serves as a platform for the construction of reality.

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List of Interviews

Dr. Liyanage Tudor Weerasinghe, Senior Lecturer in Mass Media, Sri Palee Campus, University of Colombo, 2019.

Prof. Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, Professor, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo/Political Critic/Social Activist, 2019.

Mr. L. S. C. Leelarathne, Lecturer, Department of Political Science & Public Policy, faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Colombo, 2019.

Mr. Dilanthe Withanage, Executive Officer, 'Bodu Bala Sena' Organization, Colombo, 2019.

Mr. Victor Ivan, Former Editor of 'Ravaya' Newspaper/an Investigative Journalist/Political Critic/a Theorist, Colombo, 2019.

Mr. Joe William, President of Peace Council Sri Lanka, Executive Director of CCT (Center for Communication Training), Colombo, 2019.

Interview with Activist (requested anonymity), Kandy, 2020.

Interview with Social Activist (requested anonymity), Colombo, 2020.

Interview with social organization member (requested anonymity), Colombo, 2020.

Interview with activist (requested anonymity), Kandy, 2020.

Interview with an Admin of a Facebook Religious Group, Colombo, 2019.

Interview with a Facebook admin (requested anonymity), Colombo, 2020. [1] [2] [SEP]

Interview with a Facebook admin (requested anonymity), Colombo, 2020. [1] [2] [SEP]

Interview with a Facebook admin (requested anonymity), Colombo, 2020. [1] [2] [SEP]

Interview with a Facebook admin (requested anonymity), Colombo, 2020. [1] [2] [SEP]

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