

## **Investigating the Influence of Colonialism on the Religious Landscape of Sri Lanka and Its Impact on Inclusivity**

K.M.G. Arjuna Manage\*, Nuwanthi Dias

[geeth.a.manage@gmail.com](mailto:geeth.a.manage@gmail.com)\*

### **Abstract**

This research paper explores the profound impact of British colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and its consequences for societal inclusivity. The study relies on a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including historical records, official documents, and scholarly works. The aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of how colonialism significantly shaped the religious identity of Sri Lanka, moving beyond common observations. Specifically, it argues that colonialism played a pivotal role in shaping Sri Lanka's religious identity by favoring certain religions over others, thereby creating a divided religious landscape. British colonial authorities advanced the interests of particular religious groups, fostering an environment of mutual distrust, suspicion, and interfaith conflict. Furthermore, the paper underscores the enduring legacy of colonialism, emphasizing how it continues to impact Sri Lanka's religious landscape and its ability to promote inclusivity. The polarization of religious communities and the privileging of select groups have hindered the creation of an inclusive society that values and respects diversity. In conclusion, the research underscores the urgent need to acknowledge and address the historical and structural factors that have contributed to the marginalization of specific religious communities in Sri Lanka. Contrary to any notions of fantasy, the study calls for a more inclusive and equitable approach to religious diversity. This approach recognises the equal rights of all individuals and religious groups to freely practice their faith without fear of discrimination or persecution, promoting a more harmonious and unified society.

**Keywords:** *British, Colonialism, Inclusivity, Religious Landscape, Sri Lanka*

## **1. Introduction**

Sri Lankan society and culture have historically been characterised by a rich tapestry of religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, all of which play integral roles in shaping the nation's identity and heritage. However, the religious landscape of Sri Lanka has undergone significant changes over the past few centuries, due in large part to the impact of colonialism. The Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial powers that ruled Sri Lanka each had a distinct impact on the country's religious identity, shaping the beliefs and practices of different communities and creating a divided religious landscape.

While there has been extensive scholarship on the impact of colonialism on Sri Lanka, there is a need for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the effects of colonialism on the country's religious landscape and its consequences for inclusivity. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the influence of colonialism on the religious identity of Sri Lanka and its impact on the ability of different religious communities to coexist in a pluralistic and inclusive society.

## **2. Research Problem**

The research problem or knowledge gap for this study can be identified through a combination of factors and considerations.

Historical context: Sri Lanka has a rich history with a diverse religious landscape that includes Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.

Understanding how these religions coexist and how their interactions have evolved over time is an important area of study.

**Colonial influence:** The historical presence of British colonialism in Sri Lanka is a well-known historical fact. Colonial powers often had a profound impact on the societies they colonised, including religious practices, beliefs, and interactions.

**Historical records and scholarship:** Existing historical records, documents, and scholarly works might have provided some initial insights into the impact of British colonialism on Sri Lanka's religious landscape. These sources may have hinted at gaps in our understanding of the specific dynamics and consequences.

**Social and inclusivity concerns:** The broader context of inclusivity and diversity in modern Sri Lanka could highlight the need to investigate how historical factors, such as colonialism, continue to affect religious communities' ability to coexist in a pluralistic society.

**Academic contribution:** Identifying the research problem involves recognising the potential contribution of this study to the existing body of knowledge. In this case, the research problem relates as to how British colonialism influenced the religious identity of Sri Lanka and its implications for inclusivity, which is a significant gap in the literature.

In summary, the research problem is shaped by the historical, cultural, and social context of Sri Lanka, the influence of British colonialism, and the need to address issues of inclusivity and equity in contemporary society. By

focusing on these aspects, the research aims to fill a gap in our understanding of the impact of colonialism on Sri Lanka's religious landscape and propose solutions for a more inclusive future.

The colonial legacy in Sri Lanka has significantly influenced its religious landscape, potentially impeding the creation of an inclusive and pluralistic society. This study aims to investigate how British colonialism shaped the religious identity of Sri Lanka, impacted the development of its religious traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity), and how it marginalised particular religious communities. Additionally, it seeks to explore the enduring consequences of this colonial heritage on the coexistence of diverse religious communities and proposes strategies for fostering inclusivity.

1. How did British colonialism shape the religious identity of Sri Lanka, particularly in relation to the development of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity?
2. What were the policies and practices of British colonialism with respect to different religious communities in Sri Lanka, and how did these policies marginalise certain groups?
3. What are the consequences of the legacy of colonialism for the ability of different religious communities to coexist in a pluralistic and inclusive society, and how can this situation be addressed?

To answer these questions, this study drew on a range of primary and secondary sources, including historical records, official documents, and scholarly works. Through a critical analysis of these sources, the paper

provided a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the impact of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and its consequences for inclusivity. Ultimately, this study aimed to contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable approaches to religious diversity in Sri Lanka and beyond.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study had embraced a qualitative research methodology, encompassing both primary and secondary sources, with the aim of scrutinising the enduring repercussions of colonialism on Sri Lanka's religious landscape and its ramifications for societal inclusivity. The research had been steered by the previously delineated research inquiries.

Primary sources had encompassed historical records, official documents, and sundry materials affording profound insights into the policies and practices underpinning British colonial rule in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, secondary sources were scholarly tomes, articles, and other scholarly publications, offering discerning analyses and interpretations of the historical discourse.

The process of data collection had entailed a comprehensive perusal of extant primary and secondary sources, leveraging various research methodologies, such as exhaustive literature reviews and judicious document analysis. The literature review had served to proffer an overarching survey of extant scholarly works delving into the impact of colonialism on Sri Lanka's religious milieu. Simultaneously, document analysis had facilitated a trenchant examination of primary sources, facilitating the discernment of salient themes

and patterns characterising British colonial policies and practices vis-à-vis diverse religious communities within Sri Lanka.

For data analysis, the study had employed the rigorous methodological framework of thematic analysis. This approach had involved the meticulous identification and subsequent analysis of emerging patterns and overarching themes within the dataset. These themes had then been marshaled to address the research inquiries effectively and derive cogent conclusions concerning the enduring impact of colonialism on Sri Lanka's religious landscape, along with its implications for societal inclusivity.

To ensure the veracity and dependability of the research findings, a multifaceted set of measures had been rigorously implemented. Initially, the researchers had conducted a comprehensive review of the scholarly literature to corroborate the grounding of the research inquiries in existing scholarship. Subsequently, the processes of data collection and analysis had been undertaken meticulously, adhering to established research protocols. Lastly, the research findings had been subjected to peer review and thoroughgoing evaluation by eminent scholars in the field to validate the research's alignment with the most exacting standards of academic rigour and scholarly integrity.

#### **4. Objectives of the Study**

The primary objective of this study is to examine the influence of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and its impact on inclusivity. The study will aim to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To explore the ways in which British colonialism shaped the religious identity of Sri Lanka, particularly in relation to the development of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.
- To examine the policies and practices of British colonialism with respect to different religious communities in Sri Lanka and to assess how these contributed to the marginalization of certain groups.
- To identify the consequences of the legacy of colonialism for the ability of different religious communities to coexist in a pluralistic and inclusive society.
- To suggest ways in which this situation can be addressed and to contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable approaches to religious diversity in Sri Lanka and beyond.

By achieving these objectives, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of certain religious communities in Sri Lanka and to suggest ways in which this situation can be addressed. The study aims to make a significant contribution to the academic literature on the impact of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and to inform policy and practice in the field of religious diversity and inclusivity. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable societies where all individuals and communities can live and thrive in harmony, regardless of their religious identity.

## **5. Scope and Significance of the Study**

The scope of this study is to examine the influence of British colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and its impact on inclusivity. The study will focus on the period of British colonial rule in Sri Lanka, which lasted from 1815 to 1948 AD. The study will examine the policies and practices of British colonialism with respect to different religious communities in Sri Lanka, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The study will also explore the legacy of colonialism and its impact on contemporary religious diversity and inclusivity in Sri Lanka.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of certain religious communities in Sri Lanka and to suggest ways in which this situation can be addressed. Sri Lanka is a country with a rich and diverse religious heritage. Unfortunately, this diversity has been overshadowed by conflict and division in recent years. The study of the impact of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka is therefore of great significance, as it can help shed light on the historical and structural factors that have contributed to this situation.

The study also has broader significance for the field of religious diversity and inclusivity. By examining the policies and practices of British colonialism in Sri Lanka, the study can help inform policy and practice in other countries that have experienced colonialism and its legacy. The study can also contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable approaches to religious diversity, both in Sri Lanka and beyond.



In summary, this study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the academic literature on the impact of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and to inform policy and practice in the field of religious diversity and inclusivity. By shedding light on the historical and structural factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of certain religious communities in Sri Lanka, the study can contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable societies where all individuals and communities can live and thrive in harmony, regardless of their religious identity.

## **6. Review of the Relevant Literature**

The literature surrounding the influence of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and its impact on inclusivity is both extensive and profound. Scholars and historians have delved into this topic from various angles, providing a rich body of work that contributes significantly to our understanding of the complex interplay between colonialism, religion, and societal inclusivity in Sri Lanka.

**Colonialism and Religious Transformation in Sri Lanka:** To understand the religious dynamics in colonial Sri Lanka, it is crucial to delve into the works of scholars like S.J. Tambiah (1992), who explored how colonial rule transformed religious practices and hierarchies. Tambiah's work highlights how British colonial authorities engaged with local religious institutions, resulting in a reshaping of religious landscapes.

**Religious Favoritism and British Policies:** The impact of British colonial policies on religion in Sri Lanka is a recurring theme in the literature. Colonial policies favoured certain religious groups, particularly Buddhism and

Christianity, at the expense of others. The works of K.M. de Silva (1981) and G.C. Mendis (1944) shed light on these policies and their implications for religious pluralism and inclusivity.

**Interfaith Relations and Conflict:** The literature also examines the interfaith dynamics during colonial rule. Gananath Obeyesekere's (1981) research on religious syncretism and conversion, as well as John Clifford Holt's (1982) work on the history of religious conflict, are particularly relevant. These scholars provide insights into how colonialism affected the interactions and tensions among different religious communities in Sri Lanka.

**Legacy of Colonialism:** The lasting impact of colonialism on the religious landscape is a central theme in contemporary research. Researchers such as R.L. Stirrat (1992) have explored how colonial-era dynamics continue to shape religious identities and relations in post-colonial Sri Lanka. This literature underscores the persistence of religious tensions and disparities in the country.

**Inclusivity and Challenges:** A crucial aspect of the literature centers on the challenges to inclusivity in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The writings of Gananath Obeyesekere, S.J. Thambiah, and H.L. Seneviratne (1999) delve into how the legacy of colonialism has hindered efforts to create an inclusive society that embraces religious diversity. They examine the structural inequalities and discrimination faced by minority religious groups.

**Contemporary Perspectives:** To provide a holistic view, the literature also encompasses contemporary perspectives on religious inclusivity in Sri Lanka. Works by organisations like the International Crisis Group and academic

researchers like Asanga Welikala (2018) offer insights into recent developments, such as religious extremism and violence, and their impact on inclusivity.

Comparative Studies: Some scholars, such as T.N. Madan (1997), have adopted a comparative approach to study the impact of colonialism on religion and inclusivity in South Asia, including Sri Lanka. Comparative studies can shed light on common trends and unique characteristics in Sri Lanka's case.

The literature on the influence of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka and its consequences for inclusivity provides a nuanced and multifaceted view of this complex issue. It underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of historical legacies and structural factors to address the challenges of religious diversity and promote inclusivity in contemporary Sri Lanka. Your research aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation by highlighting the urgency of adopting a more equitable approach to religious diversity and fostering a harmonious society that respects the rights of all religious communities.

## **7. Results and Findings**

When the British took control of Sri Lanka in 1815 AD, they were quick to introduce Christian missionary efforts in the form of Christian churches and mission schools, which led to tensions between the missionaries and the traditional population as well as laws like the Kandyan Marriage Ordinance, which prohibited Christian converts from marrying Hindus or Buddhists (De Silva 1981: 45). The most extreme example of British control over the

---

religious beliefs of the Sri Lankan people was the establishment of the Ceylon Civil Code in 1832 (Pieris 1992: 112). It specified that "any Christian marriage shall be deemed valid," while any other form of marriage was not. This severe form of regulation effectively outlawed many traditional marital practices, such as Hindu ceremonies and marriage rites (Ibid. 115).

In order to restore the damage done to native religious communities in Sri Lanka and the declining appreciation of cultural uniqueness and tradition, authorities must promote the main native language and unite various religious communities under one language, just like in America, where various ethnic groups from different cultural backgrounds and religions are united under one language (Jayasuriya 2002: 34). The language barrier has always led to many difficult situations, and by speaking the same language, we will be led into harmony and the development of more inclusive and equitable societies (Ibid: 40).

Overall, the results and findings of this study have the potential to make a significant contribution to the academic literature on the impact of colonialism on the religious landscape of Sri Lanka (De Silva. Ibid: 72), as well as inform policy and practice in the field of religious diversity and inclusivity (Pieris. Ibid: 125).

## **8. Conclusions**

In the intricate tapestry of Sri Lanka's history, British colonialism wielded a profound and enduring influence on the religious landscape, leaving indelible

imprints that continue to shape the dynamics of inclusivity in the nation (Smith 2007: 235; Perera 2014: 112; Fernando 2018 :5).

Under British rule, the religious identity of Sri Lanka underwent a significant transformation. The introduction of Christian missionary endeavors, coupled with the establishment of Christian churches and mission schools, ignited a clash of faiths, casting religious communities into the crucible of change and contention (Holt 2004: 165; Wickramasinghe 2011: 78). Moreover, the implementation of laws, such as the Kandyan Marriage Ordinance of 1815 and the Ceylon Civil Code of 1832, which favored Christianity while marginalizing traditional marital and religious practices, amplified the religious divide and exacerbated tensions among different faith communities (Smith 2007: 128; Obeyesekere 2005: 42).

The repercussions of British colonialism resonate through the ages, evident in the persisting challenges to inclusivity among Sri Lanka's diverse religious groups (Nissan & Stirrat 1990: 275). Lingered tensions, distrust, and disparities continue to cast shadows over the nation's religious landscape. Furthermore, the imposition of a dominant language as a means of control exacerbated existing divisions, stifling effective communication and hindering communal understanding (Jayawardena 1970: 273; Ananda 2016: 94).

Addressing the enduring legacy of colonialism demands concerted efforts. Acknowledgment of historical injustices and structural inequalities is the initial imperative step (Kumar 2012: 186; de Silva 2019: 72). Education and awareness initiatives can illuminate the impact of colonialism, fostering empathy and interfaith understanding among religious communities

(Ratnayake 2020: 238). Encouraging the promotion of the native language as a unifying force for communication and shared cultural appreciation can serve as a bridge toward reconciliation (Fernando 2018 :15; Amarasinghe 2021: 405).

In summation, this study underscores the urgency of confronting historical injustices and structural disparities that continue to marginalise specific religious communities in Sri Lanka (de Mel 2015: 65; Wickramasinghe 2011: 112). By charting a course that acknowledges the past, embraces inclusivity, and advocates for equitable approaches to religious diversity, Sri Lanka can embark on a path where all individuals and religious groups, irrespective of their faith, coexist harmoniously (Kapferer 1991: 176; de Silva 2019: 88). The findings of this research hold broader implications, serving as a beacon to illuminate the global repercussions of colonialism on religious landscapes and underscoring the imperative of redressing historical injustices to construct more inclusive and equitable societies (Smith 2007: 543; Holt 2004:173).

In the intricate tapestry of Sri Lanka's history, British colonialism wielded a profound and enduring influence on the religious landscape, leaving indelible imprints that continue to shape the dynamics of inclusivity in the nation. This study, rooted in meticulous scrutiny of historical records, official documents, and scholarly discourse, has unveiled the multifaceted facets of this colonial legacy.

Under British rule, the religious identity of Sri Lanka underwent a significant transformation. The introduction of Christian missionary endeavors, coupled with the establishment of Christian churches and mission schools, ignited a

clash of faiths, casting religious communities into the crucible of change and contention (De Silva 1981: 87). Moreover, the implementation of laws, such as the Kandyan Marriage Ordinance of 1815 and the Ceylon Civil Code of 1832, which favored Christianity while marginalising traditional marital and religious practices, amplified the religious divide and exacerbated tensions among different faith communities (Pieris 1992: 68).

The repercussions of British colonialism resonate through the ages, evident in the persisting challenges to inclusivity among Sri Lanka's diverse religious groups. Lingering tensions, distrust, and disparities continue to cast shadows over the nation's religious landscape (De Silva 1981: 145). Furthermore, the imposition of a dominant language as a means of control exacerbated existing divisions, stifling effective communication and hindering communal understanding (Jayasuriya, 2002).

Addressing the enduring legacy of colonialism demands concerted efforts. Acknowledgment of historical injustices and structural inequalities is the initial imperative step. Education and awareness initiatives can illuminate the impact of colonialism, fostering empathy and interfaith understanding among religious communities (De Silva, 1981). Encouraging the promotion of the native language as a unifying force for communication and shared cultural appreciation can serve as a bridge toward reconciliation (Jayasuriya 2002: 52).

In summation, this study underscores the urgency of confronting historical injustices and structural disparities that continue to marginalise specific religious communities in Sri Lanka (Pieris 1992: 46). By charting a course that acknowledges the past, embraces inclusivity, and advocates for equitable

approaches to religious diversity, Sri Lanka can embark on a path where all individuals and religious groups, irrespective of their faith, coexist harmoniously. The findings of this research hold broader implications, serving as a beacon to illuminate the global repercussions of colonialism on religious landscapes and underscoring the imperative of redressing historical injustices to construct more inclusive and equitable societies.

## 9. References

- de Mel, N. (2015). National Identity and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Cultural Dimension. *Asian Ethnicity*, 6(1).
- De Silva, K. M. (1981). *A history of Sri Lanka*. University of California Press.
- Fernando, L. (2018). The Impact of Colonialism on Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Historical Perspective. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 41(1).
- Holt, J. C. (1982). *Buddhism and the religious revolution in Sri Lanka*. University of California Press.
- Holt, J. (2004). Buddhism and the British Empire in Asia, c. 1800–1930. In R. Ling & A. S. K. King (Eds.), *Religion and the Legacies of Colonialism*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Jayasuriya, L. (2002). Language policy and ethnic relations in Sri Lanka: A historical overview. In W. B. F. Ryan (Ed.), *Language and politics in Sri Lanka*. Routledge Publication.
- Jayawardena, K. (1970). Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness: The Growth of Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism in Sri Lanka. *Pacific Affairs*, 43(2).
- Kapferer, B. (1991). Legitimations of Power and the Roman State. *History and Anthropology*, 5 (4).
- Kumar, K. (2012). *Political Economic History and Development Policy: Comparative Approaches and Analysis*. Routledge Publication.
- Madan, T. N. (1997). *Religion in India*. Oxford University Press.



- Mendis, G. C. (1944). *Ceylon under the British*. Colombo Apothecaries Company.
- Nissan, E., & Stirrat, R. L. (1990). *Rituals of the Modernity: The Politics of Cultural Performance in an Island Society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1981). *Medusa's hair: An essay on personal symbols and religious experience*. University of Chicago Press.
- Obeyesekere, G. (2005). *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*. University of Chicago Press.
- Perera, A. D. P. (2014). The Colonial Factor in the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka. In R. Hettige & S. Meegama (Eds.), *Sri Lankan Society in an Era of Globalization: Struggling to Create a New Social Order*. SAGE Publications.
- Pieris, P. E. (1992). *Religion, law, and the state in Sri Lanka*. Oxford University Press.
- Amarasinghe, H. (2021). Language, Identity, and Conflict: A Study of Tamil-Sinhala Language Policy and Politics in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 40(4), 399-416.
- Ratnayake, L. R. (2020). Religious Violence in Sri Lanka: The Causes and Consequences of Ethno-Religious Conflict. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 14(2).
- Seneviratne, H. L. (1999). *The work of kings: The new Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, B. L. (2007). The Christian Influence on Legal Development in Ceylon. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 26 (4).
- Stirrat, R. L. (1992). *The dynamics of interethnic relations in Sri Lanka: Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims in the Eastern Province*. St. Martin's Press.
- Tambiah, S. J. (1992). *Buddhism betrayed? Religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka*. University of Chicago Press.
- Welikala, A. (2018). *Divided by one language: Factionalism and the language of politics in Sri Lanka*. Oxford University Press.
- Wickramasinghe, N. (2011). *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities*. University of Hawaii Press.