



Collective War Memory and Ethnic Reconciliation in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Voices from the Eastern Province

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More than a decade after the formal end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009, reconciliation remains fragile and contested. While post-war state initiatives have prioritized infrastructure development and economic reconstruction, less attention has been given to the enduring role of war memory in shaping interethnic relations and community trust. This study examines how war memory influences ethnic reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka, focusing on the Eastern Province—one of the regions most severely affected by the conflict. The research was conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Karadiyanaru village, Batticaloa District, using a mixed-methods ethnographic design. Qualitative data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with war-affected civilians, including war widows, ex-combatants, elders, and community leaders, along with 10 key informant interviews. Quantitative data were obtained from a simple random sample household survey of 110 respondents selected from 130 distributed questionnaires. Thematic and narrative analysis techniques were applied to qualitative data, while descriptive statistical analysis was used for survey findings. The findings reveal that collective memories of fear, displacement, insecurity, and loss remain deeply embedded in everyday life, shaping interpersonal trust and interethnic engagement. Participants emphasized that state-led memorialization practices often privilege narratives of military victory while marginalizing Tamil suffering, producing emotional distress and a sense of exclusion from national reconciliation frameworks. Material development initiatives such as road construction, housing schemes, and livelihood programs were perceived as insufficient in addressing unresolved trauma, demands for recognition, and structural grievances. Respondents prioritized dignified memorialization, access to death certificates, proper burials, psychosocial support, compensation, and equitable power-sharing arrangements as essential components of reconciliation. The study argues that sustainable reconciliation in Sri Lanka requires integrating memory-sensitive, trauma-informed, and justice-oriented approaches into national peacebuilding strategies. By foregrounding survivor testimony and community narratives, this research contributes to sociological debates on memory politics and transitional justice in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Ethnic reconciliation, Post-conflict Sri Lanka, Psychological trauma, Transitional justice, War memory