THE CHALLENGES OF SRI LANKAN MINORITY LEADERSHIP IN THE STATE UNIVERSITIES: EQUITY AND EQUALITY

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Abstract:

Sri Lankan minorities constantly face discrimination and experience marginalization. This has reduced their access to education and ability to demonstrate leadership within state campuses. Further, there exists a dearth of minority leadership research in Sri Lanka. As a result, this paper reviews a wide variety of contemporary literature to elaborate on the possible reasons for limited access and leadership within state universities amongst minorities. Based on the reviewed literature, two critical problems were identified. Firstly, the irregular distribution of students, professors, and fiscal resources is a major impediment to university access and leadership. Secondly, systematic ethnocentric policies advocated through responsible authorities are also a reason for limiting educational equality and leadership among minority students within campuses. Because of these two problems, the authors reason how improved diversity and appreciation for all cultures through curricular and policy changes could enhance access, equality, and leadership for everyone including minority groups in the state university system. Further, by understanding the present barriers, the researchers

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encourage other scholars to consider leadership research in the future to address untapped aspects of minority discourse and related educational reforms in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: minority groups, equality, diversity, leadership, equity

1. Introduction

Leadership development is one of the most significant parts of learning in any higher education institution (HEI). Traditionally, being a university student ensures receiving ample opportunities for leadership development. Yet, the educational landscape in Sri Lanka appears deficient in bringing significant outcomes for students in HEIs (Peiris et al. 2022). Similarly, the existing public universities fall short in maintaining satisfactory equity, equality, and inclusivity (Wedikandage, 2014; Lall, 2016; Duncan & Cardozo, 2017; Chandrabose & Logeswary, 2019; Herath, 2019). The resulting combination of limitations in tertiary education impedes the development of minority student leadership. In consequence, the purpose of this article is to paint a picture of the challenges associated with minority leadership among university students in terms of equity, equality, and representation. Although an abundance of literature is available on Sri Lankan minorities, most research focuses on war and reconciliation while the emphasis given to leadership is minimal. Moreover, the dogmatic and nationalistic Sinhalese-Buddhist ideologies may have further exacerbated the growing trend of discouraging minority discourse in Sri Lanka which has created noticeable gaps in leadership literature (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2014; DeVotta, 2021). As a result, in this literature review, possible reasons that may have given rise to the mentioned deficits and how such problems may impact the leadership opportunities of minority students within the state campuses are explored.

As introduced in the preceding paragraph, ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka face challenges in receiving education (Wedikandage, 2014; Eckstein, 2018; Pieris, 2019). In Sri Lanka, one could encounter three ethnic minorities in the present research literature: Sri Lankan Tamil, Indian Tamil, and Muslims. Of the 22.24 million population, 11.2 percent are Sri Lankan Tamil, 4.2 percent are Indian Tamil, and 9.2 percent are Muslims (Minority Rights Group International, 2018). Contemporary findings suggest minority groups in Sri Lanka experience discrimination and marginalization (Chandrabose, Logeswary, 2019; Satkunanathan, 2020). This prevalence of discriminatory practices has also reached the educational sphere making universities in Sri Lanka heavily politicized (Russell, 2022). Moreover, some researchers have found state universities to have subtle forms of racism (Eckstein, 2018; ICES & E-ICHRE, 2018). Furthermore, cohesion among minority student groups with the majority is often hindered due to an existing language barrier and a host of other problems that seem to curtail accessibility (Herath, 2020; DFAT, 2021). Generally, cohesion creates a favorable environment and enhances trust amongst students to get actively involved on campuses (Bosselut, Castro, Chevalier, & Fouquereau, 2020; Bai, Ramos, & Fiske, 2020). Moreover, continued involvement has the capacity to improve the

conversational abilities of students which could also enhance socio-cognitive attributes associated with leadership (Young, 2017; Lu, Nisbett, Morris, 2020). However, the degree to which successful demonstration of leadership is possible within state universities in Sri Lanka is questionable. Firstly, leadership research about South Asian students implies a reluctance among students to consider themselves as leaders (Nguyen, 2016). Secondly, contemporary research in Sri Lanka also claims the average Sri Lankan university student lacks leadership skills such as assertiveness, negotiation, etc. (Hettige, 2021). Thirdly, deficits in leadership skills are further prevalent in minority groups due to limitations in access to education and equal opportunities reported within the educational system (Chandrabose, Logeswary, 2019; Herath, 2020).

Similarly, within Sri Lanka, the mentioned minorities speak Tamil primarily whereas the majority (75 percent) speak Sinhala. According to Eckstein (2018), most Sri Lankans are not enthused about learning the other ethnic group's tongue. Such lack of enthusiasm may have been a result of the 25-year civil war from 1983-2009, which started due to a host of anti-Tamil policies with a strong inclination by Tamils toward safeguarding linguistic identity (Pieris, 2019). This may have increased the language barrier between Sinhalese and Tamils which could further curtail the chances of minority students to actively involve within state-owned campuses (Liyanage, 2019; Herath, 2020). As per Perera (2015), only 1.8 percent of Sinhalese can speak Tamil, and only 31.4 percent of Sri Lankan Tamils can speak Sinhala. English literacy of both groups also remains low as visible in Table 1. However, just a language barrier could not be attributed as the sole obstruction to minority student leadership in Sri Lanka.

Table 1: Literacy rates in Sri Lanka by ethnicity (Perera, 2015)

Literacy	Sinhalese	Sri Lankan Tamil	Indian Tamil	Muslim
Sinhala	92.3%	31.4%	15.7%	38.5%
English	16.2%	24.1%	11.0%	24.0%
Tamil	1.8%	78.5%	72.7%	84.2%

A review of the literature indicates two major issues that may have reduced minority students' intentions to seek leadership positions within state campuses. Firstly, it is the irregular distribution of minority students, professors, and fiscal resources within the university system. Secondly, it is the deficits in equality in education and opportunities due to ethnocentric policies enacted by responsible authorities. Thus, in this paper, the intention is to review how the identified problems impact the leadership opportunities of minority students within state campuses. Further, such a review of minority leadership may imply significance as discourse about Tamils, in general, is discouraged in Sri Lanka (DeVotta, 2021).

2. Methodology

This article is an empirical literature review. As per Azam et al. (2021), a literature review helps in demonstrating a gap in research to stress the necessity to conduct an

investigative or exploratory study. Similarly, a literature review contains the capacity to be a research article of its own right (Azam et al. 2021). Accordingly, in the present study, a variety of research papers, policy documents, and resources by key governmental and non-governmental organizations were garnered to successfully portray the current state of affairs pertaining to the identified phenomena of interest. The authors only selected papers that clearly discuss Sri Lankan minority groups and their learning experiences in government educational institutions. Keywords germane to the study title such as "Sri Lankan Tamil," "Sri Lanka Muslim / Moor," "university," "education," "marginalization," "discrimination," "inclusion," "leadership," etc. were used to search articles on multiple databases (i.e., Google Scholar, ResearchGate, etc.). In most instances, multiple keywords were combined to facilitate Boolean searches to narrow down the search to the most suitable publications for reviewing.

All chosen papers contained discourse about Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, and Muslims. A major reason to consider the mentioned minorities for this study is the fact that more than 90 percent of Sri Lanka's ethnic minorities comprise Tamils, and Muslims. Further, all these three ethnic minorities have experienced systematic discrimination in obtaining education. Accordingly, all selected research literature was reviewed in-depth to understand common core issues that have negatively influenced equity, equality, and representation of Tamil and Muslim student leadership in state campuses.

3. Findings

Based on the literature reviewed, two key impediments to equity and equality in minority students' leadership were identified.

3.1. Equity of Resources

Irregularities in creating inclusive university environments and partiality in student enrollment processes limit minority students from experiencing essential means for success in university education. A major reason for this is the pattern in which minority students are distributed in the state university system. Tamil and Muslim students are primarily assigned to Jaffna University (JU) and the Eastern University (EU) with low enrollments maintained for universities in cities where the majority is Sinhalese. JU is situated in the Northern Province and the EU is situated in the Eastern Province where the majority of the general population speaks Tamil. This pattern is demonstrated in Table 2. Deliberately limiting minority student placements in some of the state campuses is further evident in universities such as *Ruhuna* where only five Tamil and eleven Muslim students are recruited for the medical faculty where the total number of students registered for the program in the said university for 2019/2020 academic year has 235 Sinhalese students (UGC, 2020). Similar patterns are noticeable in *Kelaniya* University as well where the minority representation is noticeably low compared to Colombo University.

This disparity in student enrollments may have resulted due to ethnic tension that once existed between the two communities. In the twentieth century, university entrance was considered on academic merit, and the resulting representation of Tamils in sciences, engineering, and medicine was exceptionally high (Wickramasinghe, 2012). As DeVotta (2022) reasons, higher literacy in English was a major reason for such representation. However, through the implementation of multiple policies such as 'standardization policy' merit-based admission to universities was discarded and quota systems based on ethnicities, districts, etc. were introduced (Wickramasinghe, 2012; DeVotta, 2022). Although such policies were later amended to enhance fairness, the damage was already done in the late twentieth century. Firstly, such policies increased unemployment, which also paved the path to a 25-year-old civil war between Sri Lanka government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Although the standardization policy was changed, and the war ended, clashes between Sinhalese and Tamil students are still witnessed (Sivapalan et al., 2016). Some of the clashes are due to simple disagreements between Sinhalese and Tamil students, and at times they are politically motivated.

Table 2: Undergraduate admissions, Academic Year 2019/2020 (UGC, 2020)

University	Ethnicity	Degree Program	
		Medicine	Science
Colombo University	Sinhala	166	576
	Tamil	38	47
	Muslim	10	28
	Other	0	1
	Total	**214**	**652**
Kelaniya University	Sinhala	155	706
	Tamil	4	38
	Muslim	29	30
	Other	1	1
	Total	**189**	**775**
Jaffna University	Sinhala	59	472
	Tamil	93	176
	Muslim	21	74
	Other	1	1
	Total	**174**	**723**
Eastern University	Sinhala	39	321
	Tamil	28	79
	Muslim	18	50
	Other	2	1
	Total	**87**	**451**

In the present study, the authors posit that most of these problems can be alleviated if minority students can be assigned to universities within Sinhala-dominated areas. This could enhance much-needed assimilation as minority students obtain a chance to master the local language and culture as they interact with host families (Su, 2018). This can enhance the self-awareness and intercultural competence of minority students which are

all traits conducive to leadership (Diego-Lazaro, Winn, Restrepo, 2020; Nguyen, Jefferies, Rojas, 2018). In that manner, the language barrier can be reduced. Further, improvements in linguistic skills also have a positive impact on leadership capacities (Henderson, Gilbert, Zimbardo, 2014; Young, 2017). By creating a university with more diverse student groups, the leadership capabilities of both Sinhalese and Tamil students could be further inculcated. Similarly, enhanced interaction between Sinhalese and Tamil students can make both parties sensitive towards the needs of each other as it also fosters essential leadership skills such as empathy and perspective-taking (Nguyen, Jefferies, Rojas, 2018).

Table 3: Key information of state universities, 2019/2020 (UGC, 2020)

University	Total Undergraduate Students	Total Admissions	Total Number of Professors	Total Recurrent Expenditure (in LKR millions)
Jaffna	10875	4269	35	3673
Eastern	5842	2572	13	1863
Peradeniya	11193	3575	206	8395
Ruhuna	8270	4146	95	4405

Similar to the irregular distribution of minority students in the university system, the allocation of professors within universities also is indicative of some form of skewness. For instance, the universities in the North and East clearly fall short of the number of professors and this becomes a problem as the majority of the minority students learn in the North and East (Sorensen, 2008; Pieris, 2019). A simple comparison of North's Jaffna University and Central province's Peradeniya University gives a clear snapshot to comprehend the existing teacher deficit at *Jaffna* and Eastern universities. This portrays how unequally fiscal and human capital resources are distributed within the same system. Teacher resources and recurrent expenditure at JU are significantly low compared to *Peradeniya*. Further, the number of professors in EU is disturbingly low compared to *Ruhuna*. Teacher resources are essential for overall learner development and especially leadership development. Recent research has shown a clear impact of teachers on student leadership performance. For instance, verbal encouragement is a primary way in which a person can improve their beliefs of efficacy (Bhati & Sethy, 2022). Similarly, teachers are capable of enhancing the efficacy beliefs of students and facilitating guided discovery and mastery of essential skills (Bhati & Sethy, 2022). For instance, enhanced efficacy has a positive impact on goal achievement (Gebauer, McElvany, Koller, Schober, 2021). In such a sense, the lack of professors is a clear barrier to getting minority students to demonstrate leadership and receive the required encouragement within campuses compared to students of other universities.

It is clear that the irregular distribution of students, teachers, and fiscal resources has a substantial impact on minority student leadership. Similarly, the same has a debilitating effect on minorities on their access to education as well. While such deficits in access to education demonstrate weak national policies, it also portrays the Laisses-Faire attitude maintained by the accountable authorities of Sri Lanka. Although lack of

access to higher education is a problem felt by all minority groups in Sri Lanka, it is experienced in an unprecedented way by Indian (*Malaiyaha*) Tamils who are concentrated in the central hill country (CHC). According to ISI & Verite Research (2019), *Malaiyaha* Tamils is a stateless community and is one of the most oppressed in Sri Lanka. This community is first brought to Sri Lanka by the British during their annexure of Sri Lanka from 1815-1948 for labor in tea plantations. Even at present, this ethnic community is called "Indian Tamil" which suggests that the group is foreign to Sri Lanka which further promotes alienation for the said community (Chandrabose & Logeswary, 2019).

Further, the literacy of Sinhala of Indian Tamils is 15.5 percent (Perera, 2015). As a result, education is primarily sought in Tamil. To make matters worse, ISI & Verite Research (2019) report, even the educational enrollment rates of Indian Tamils are substantially lower compared to others in urban and rural settings (*table 4*). It is noticed that the lack of teachers at General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level to instruct in Tamil medium is a major reason for lower enrollment rates. As a result of this, the number of students who receive the chance to get into state campuses is extremely low.

Table 4: Enrollment disparities in education by community (ISI & Verite Research, 2019)

Grades	Urban	Rural	Plantation
1 – 5	95.9%	95.3%	93.1%
6 – 9	92.3%	93.3%	83.5%
10 – 11	86.2%	81.4%	53.8%
12 – 13	45.8%	39.7%	12.8%

The lack of universities that offer Tamil medium education in the Nuwara Eliya district of the CHC where the majority of Indian Tamils live is a major problem that hinders higher education access. Thondaman Vocational Training Center is one of the only tertiary education bodies in the CHC, and that considers only 200 students per year (High Commission of India, 2017; Chandrabose & Logeswary, 2019). Despite numerous pleas for assistance, the responsible authorities still maintain a Laissez-Faire attitude. This attitude of Sri Lankan authorities shows how access to education has been continuously impeded implying clear educational equity-related deficits. Higher education access for Indian Tamils is further obstructed by plantation companies as well. For instance, as ISI & Verite Research (2019) report, once a student had to wait one full month to receive her offer letter to the university as the letter was lying in the estate office the entire time.

Moreover, deprivation of education makes communities marginalized and voiceless. As Allman (2013) reasons, policies of inclusion and exclusion show actions a nation would consider for society. In Sri Lanka, the emphasis on such policies remains shallow. This is evident by the degree to which *Malaiyaha* Tamils' upward social mobility is interrupted. For instance, most students study only up to GCE Ordinary Levels, and the ones who get into universities are still not given a chance to do a desk job within the same estate for which they once worked as laborers (Srinivasan, 2023). Although the concerns of Indian Tamils are much graver compared to Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims,

the above elaboration still provides evidence to support the irregular distribution of minority students, as a whole, in the state university system.

Assessing the literature about *Malaiyaha* Tamils' campus involvement is the most sensible method to improve their leadership skills and upward social mobility. Although access to higher education for Indian Tamils is low as of now, there is a positive trend as many students in plantations now learn more and more Sinhala (ISI & Verite Research, 2019). However, considering all the points elaborated on in the previous paragraphs, it is clear that all minorities have reduced access to higher education demonstrating substantial inequalities. For Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims, the present situation clearly impedes chances to display leadership. However, for Indian Tamils, the situation is of grave concern as this group still lacks noticeable access to education, and for them, leadership is still an aspect far from reach.

3.2. Equality in Education and Opportunities

Similar to equity, equality in education and opportunities to demonstrate leadership is further curbed through ethnocentric views of responsible authorities. As per the contemporary literature evaluated, ethnocentrism has cascaded into both curricula and policy of higher education drawing implications to the overall sociopolitical landscape of Sri Lanka. In that sense, creating a more inclusive university system helps eliminate subtle forms of racism that exist within universities. One of the key reasons that may have created subtle forms of racism within universities could be the ethnocentric curricula that have been delivered in the school systems over the last decades. In addition to ethnocentric curricula, Sri Lankan schools are segregated based on factors such as gender, language, and religion (Duncan & Cardozo, 2017; Liyanage, 2019; Pieris, 2019). Even within such segregated systems, still, most administrative circulars are issued in Sinhala making minority educators feel less privileged (Sorensen, 2008). Even within school systems, Tamil students have witnessed translational errors in textbooks (Sorensen, 2008). These are all indicative of continued marginalization and discrimination. Amidst all of these, a lack of appreciation for minorities in school curricula is also noticed as a major problem (Wedikandage, 2014). What keeps most ethnicity-related problems within school systems perpetuating is the behavior of some teachers who endorse the government's position in using ethnocentric curricula to promote nationalism (Duncan & Cardozo, 2017).

As a country that has experienced decades-long civil war and ethnic tensions, the usage of ethnocentric curricula is not helping. It takes ethnocentrism from the school system to the university system. Moreover, as Wettawa (2016) elaborates, left-wing political parties also encourage everyone to seek education in the Sinhala language to further promote cohesion among Sinhalese. This could be a reason why universities still have subtle racism (Eckstein, 2018). Clashes between Sinhalese students and minority students are common (Sivapalan et al., 2016). Similar to clashes due to ethnic problems, heated fights and debates are common among student groups with different views (i.e., hazing). The recent-most evidence for hazing comes from *Peradeniya* where a group of

students was attacked in a canteen. The attacked group of students are banned from a fellow group of students from the canteen for not endorsing hazing (Sunday Times, 2022). In that sense, it seems that there are multiple layers of division within the universities which could have been due to over-exposure to biased-curricula (i.e., ethnocentric, leftist, religio-centric, etc.). Bandara & Liyanage (2015) express that students generally also have a negative attitude towards each other. In such a state, biased-curricula further diminish the appreciation and empathy students have toward others (Cunningham & Ladd, 2018). As Stephen & Pathak (2016) reason, leadership skills can be honed through exposure to multiple cultures. However, if Sinhalese students who do not endorse hazing are marginalized and beaten, one could only wonder about the plight of minority students.

Similarly, JU is also known for Tamil nationalism which over the years has resulted in a reduction of Sinhalese students' attendance (Russell, 2022). Such nationalism may have been a reason behind student leader beatings and assassinations. For instance, two Tamil university students were killed by law enforcement authorities in the year of 2016 (Tamil Guardian, 2020). Even though it is clear that the leadership of minority students is not encouraged through effective curricular changes, the government about a decade ago established a leadership training program for university students of Sr Lanka (Tamil Guardian, 2013; Sri Lanka Brief, 2014). At face value such a policy seems beneficial, however, the nature of the policy is incoherent. In the said leadership program, students had to obtain the training prior to attending the state campuses. However, what is disturbing about this leadership program was the fact that it was coordinated by military personnel. Further, it lacked a proper academic curriculum. Moreover, a student died while obtaining the training (JUSTA, 2014). Additionally, the instruction manual given to students who took part in the training had the defense secretary's face on its cover page which undermines the purpose of the leadership training as it advocates nationalistic sentiments even in the training (JUSTA, 2014). This is a good example to show how ethnocentrism has seethed into the national policies of Sri Lanka which affect thousands of minority students.

Similar to all of the above-mentioned points, Sri Lankan politicians enacted a series of anti-minority policies and campaigns for various political gains. Throughout history, such policies have impacted university education directly and indirectly. The start of most problems is the establishment of the Sinhala Only Act No 33 of 1956 (Ministry of Justice, 2016). During these times minorities faced multiple issues of which one is career stagnation (Hoole, 2016). To add to existing discriminatory policies, standardization policy was also introduced in the late twentieth century by left-wing politicians who had a vested interest in making Sri Lanka a Sinhalese-Buddhist state. Although the standardization policy later went through amendments, the damage it did fueled the growing differences between Sinhalese and Tamils. During the same times, those who could not effectively communicate in Sinhala were not promoted and unemployment amongst Tamils grew (DeVotta, 2022). As the tension between ethnic groups brewed, Sri Lanka witnessed the Black July where more than 2000 Tamils lost their lives (Russell, 2022). As per Srinivasan (2021), many student executions have taken place during these

tough times. A prime example to demonstrate how ethnic tension affected academia was the demise of young academic Rajani Thiranagama. She was assassinated on her way back home from the University of Jaffna (Russell, 2022).

As clearly visible, student and academician arrests and deaths indicate continued discrimination and marginalization of minority groups. Furthermore, as Russell (2022) explains, a key reason for such arrests and deaths could be due to the university system in Sri Lanka being heavily political. These experiences could be a major factor that pulls away minority students from seeking leadership opportunities within state campuses. Furthermore, minorities experienced a series of assassinations of political leaders such as Nadaraja Raviraj, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, and Lakshman Kadiragamar in recent years (Tamil Guardian, 2021a; Fernandopulle, 2018; Jeyaraj, 2021). In some sense, assassinations portray forced withdrawal and continued marginalization of minority groups in Sri Lanka (Russell, 2022). The suppression of the voice and leadership of Tamil students is further visible as news about destroying war memorials treasured by students of JU was ordered for demolishing (De Silva, 2021). The resulting protests, involvement of military personnel, lecturer resignations and terminations are all suggestive of the regime's plan on suppressing minority leadership.

Similar to Tamils, Muslims in Sri Lanka also recently underwent a series of anti-Muslim campaigns as well. Ever since the end of the civil war in 2009, Muslims in Sri Lanka have been a target of extremism (Amnesty International, 2021). Most of the violence and associated aggression was prevalent in the Western Province more than Northern and Eastern provinces (Razick, Gafoordeen, Mazahir, 2018). In 2013 and 2014, clashes between Sinhalese and Muslims led by extremist Sinhalese-Buddhist groups such as *Bodu Bala Sena* destroyed places of worship, civilian houses, and business with at least one person killed in the process (Amnesty International, 2021; Razak & Saleem, 2022). According to Amnesty International, the majority of this violence was endorsed by political parties to receive support from the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority.

Further, with the Easter Attacks in 2019, arrests targeting Muslims were further exacerbated. As Amnesty International (2021) reports, some Muslim scholars and businessmen were detained for expressing opinions, of which one was detained for writing a Tamil language poem. In such a situation, the amount of appreciation or freedom minority students would experience within Sri Lankan state campuses is highly questionable. It is clear that leadership is something that has long been suppressed from rising within the minorities in Sri Lanka. It is often said that many minority academics also find themselves in a state of fear due to similar issues (Minority Rights Group International, 2011).

As described earlier, cultural exposure and experiencing diversity are conducive to leadership development (Nguyen, Jefferies, Rojas, 2018). Such exposure could enhance empathy, accountability, emotional intelligence, assertiveness, etc. that minority students seem to get deprived in the vicinity of the dire conditions within the education system elaborated in the preceding sections of this paper. In that sense, the accessibility minority groups have to education and experience leadership within campuses is systematically

controlled by regulatory bodies. This also shows how difficult it is to transform Sri Lanka to become a pluralistic society (Cunningham & Ladd, 2018). These issues are also a reason that motivates many Tamils to leave Sri Lanka (Russell, 2022).

As Razak & Saleem (2021) have demonstrated in their research, some Sri Lankans are under the belief that Tamils and Muslims one day rule Sri Lanka. This is a form of a minority complex of a majority. This could be a reason why the North Province of Sri Lanka is kept under militarization. In a recent report by Sivapalan et al. (2019), it was mentioned that a vice chancellor at Jaffna University was sacked due to an intelligence report by the Military. It is further said that the vice chancellor was denied to provide a formal reply. This incident indicates the degree to which militarization has impacted the higher education landscape. Furthermore, as Cunningham & Ladd (2018) explain, authorities refrain from including the recent history of civil war and alternative perspectives and interpretations of contemporary issues of Sri Lanka in school textbooks. This lack of emphasis on recent history is a major reason for not being able to transform Sri Lanka into a society that appreciates pluralism. This may have been a reason why universities still have subtle forms of racism and divisions between students (Eckstein, 2018). These problems are further aggravated since the emphasis on student welfare that promotes communication and leadership skills in state universities is low (Asian Development Bank, 2016).

Similar to what Cunningham & Ladd (2018) suggested, Holoien (2013) also states that clashes between students can be reduced or eliminated by exposing students to diversity which can be delivered through curricular changes. Such changes to curricula can enhance interaction between students which in return can develop essential leadership skills such as empathy, patience, and confidence among students (Nguyen, Jefferies, Rojas, 2018). Even in the year 2016, when a clash between Sinhalese and Tamil students took place at the JU, the university responded to this innovatively. Then vice-chancellor of JU facilitated a workshop for students to learn further about diversity (Sivapalan et al., 2019). However, such diversity workshops must be conducted in every university to change the attitudes of students in a positive manner.

As Bai, Ramos, & Fiske (2020) explain, ensuring more time for interaction could develop cohesion and trust among groups. Through such interaction, students can experience a heightened sense of intercultural competence and enhancement in efficacy beliefs making students consider exerting effort to set achievable goals (Nguyen, Jefferies, Rojas, 2018; Diego-Lazaro, Winn, Restrepo, 2020; Gebauer, McElvany, Koller, Schober, 2021). Further, continued interactions among students can make them comprehend the commonalities between the students (Peifer & Yangchen, 2017). In that sense, Sri Lankan authorities can attempt to develop university curricula in such a way that it gets students to engage with multiple student groups.

Although theoretically achieving such diversity within campuses seems a possibility, such initiatives are far from reality. The present situation of universities in Sri Lanka is unpredictable. Since, the required diversity is not available in the present university system, enhancing student leadership skills among minority students is highly

questionable. Furthermore, it was noticed that the military gets involved with student leadership work at JU (Tamil Guardian, 2019). In a recent event where university students distribute stationary objects to school children, the army interfered and coordinated. Similarly, on many occasions' student union leaders of JU have been arrested, and at certain times they were also physically harmed by paramilitary groups (WSWS, 2012; JUSTA, 2014).

Although as per Sivapalan et al. (2019) & Russell (2022), JU has always been central in Tamil nationalism since the twentieth century, the militarization of the Northern province shows a forced suppression of the minorities to politically marginalize them. In such a situation, it is unclear how minority student leadership is favored in the Sri Lankan state campus system. Such forced suppression of Tamil leadership may also go hand in hand with the attempts historically have been taken to discourage discourse about Tamils in Sri Lanka (DeVotta, 2021).

4. Conclusion

As described in the above passages, multiple impediments limit minority students from accessing higher education and displaying leadership within state campuses. Both the irregular distribution of students, professors, and fiscal resources, and ethnocentric education policies have impacted equity, equality, and representation of minority students and their capacity to lead within Sri Lankan universities. All reviewed literature implies a systematic campaign against minorities to forcibly suppress their voices and marginalize them in society. The minority complex and inadequacy many Sinhalese individuals experience due to majoritarian propaganda by media and politicians is a key reason behind the discrimination of minorities in contemporary Sri Lanka. This suppression of students' voices by responsible authorities and failure to establish a suitable action plan to ensure equity and equality in minority leadership in universities is indicative of a laissez-faire mentality. The continuous marginalization of minority groups makes it difficult for Sri Lanka to become a pluralist society. Moreover, the lack of a clear action plan to eliminate the aforementioned issues poses significant risks to the continuity and longevity of HEIs within Sri Lanka. To overcome such risks, Perera, Rahmat, Khatibi, & Azam (2021) recommends HEIs follow international standards (i.e., adopting a diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) framework within universities). Further, through combined educational and awareness programs, all university students should be made aware of the repercussions of racial discrimination and unequal opportunities. Such awareness will bring forward a common societal mentality which in return will allow the gradual establishment of higher acceptance of Tamils by Sinhalese and vice versa. Enhancing similar awareness via curricular changes is suggested by other contemporary research such as Cunningham & Ladd (2018). Further, research by Russell (2022) also agrees with the possibility of using universities as centers to improve cohesion among students displaying the consistency of the present review's findings with recent literature. Accordingly, a clear strategy placed within universities could provide much-

needed equity and equality for minority students to actively involve and lead within universities.

Similarly, the youth of present-day Sri Lanka requests fairness for everyone; but, the damage policies in history have contributed to the majority of the present problems identified in HEIs seem to be irreversible. As DeVotta (2022) says, the populist policies of Sri Lankan leaders have made Sri Lanka a kakistocracy. While the mistakes remain to be corrected, the minority leaders within universities should also be constructively concerned about the total unity of the nation rather than having a silo mentality and voicing dissatisfaction that may not be beneficial to the specific minority groups, and more broadly, the collective society.

In consequence, by understanding the identified problems of this literature review, the authors rationalize the possibility of considering the university a place to promote ethnic cohesion by teaching students the importance of appreciating each other through which the post-war reconciliation efforts can be enhanced. This is one of the salient implications of the present literature review as it informs the feasibility of considering universities to promote leadership among minority students to further drive cultural assimilation and inter-ethnic understanding. Thus, the government of Sri Lanka may provide more diverse learning experiences for university students to develop intercultural competence which in return can boost one's self-awareness and sensitivity towards others. This will also create responsible student leaders the country desperately needs at present. Through such emerging leaders the identified problems of the irregular distribution of students, lecturers, and fiscal resources, and ethnocentrism in administration will cease to exist. Future research may further explore the applicability of the previously suggested good practices via in-depth interviews with minority students across Sri Lankan public universities.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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