

# RELATIONSHIP AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE POST-WAR CONTEXT IN THE SOUTH EASTERN COASTAL REGION OF AMPARA DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

Journal of Social Review  
Volume 3 (2)  
December 2014  
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Social Sciences

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## Abstract

*The internal civil war had taken place in Sri Lanka for last three decades which was resulted in numerous human civilian casualties in the country. It was ended with the military defeat of LTTE in 2009. The fundamental reason for this ethnic conflict was an ideology of ethnicity or misunderstanding of ethnic phenomena, and, which was the huge challenge for the sovereignty of the country. In Sri Lanka, there are many ethnic groups namely Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslims and Burgers and so on who determine their identity and solidarity in various levels. In the early period, these ethnic groups maintained their separate ethnic identities as well as they were living together in their common social life. In past history, Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims were maintained their rigid relationship and they were fighting as unity for the independent of Sri Lanka against British colonial masters. Then, ethnic relationship was broken by some collection of incidents in the past. In this context, this study attempts to emphasis the concept of ethnicity, ethnic relation, and the nature of ethnic relationship among ethnic groups those are living in the south eastern region of Ampara district in the post-war context consequently. The key objective of this study is to conceptualize the idea of ethnicity and ethnic relation and to understand the ethnic relationship in the south eastern region of Ampara district through the history. Further, this study examines the current progress of ethnic cohesion among Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims in the area of research. This is primarily a qualitative study. The study shows that the ethnic relation in the study area was strengthened in early period, and it collapsed during the war time and, after 2009 again they are maintaining the rigid relationship within the ethnic groups. But, pathetically, the new era of resettlement activities of the government and the emergence of Buddhist movements highlights as crucial issue to re-raise the same ethnic misunderstanding (prejudice) and discriminations as they had earlier during the war period. So, this situation has to be mitigated by the government and civil society organizations in order to ensure the democracy and the peaceful environment by considering all ethnic groups in the study area as well as in Sri Lanka.*

## Introduction

The internal civil war had taken place in Sri Lanka for last three decades and it destroyed mankind in the country. But the war and terrorism (arm conflict) has stopped by the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) in 2009. The fundamental reason for this ethnic

conflict was an ideology of ethnicity or misunderstanding of ethnic phenomena, and, which was the huge challenge for the sovereignty of the nation. In Sri Lanka, there are many ethnic groups namely Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslims and Burgers and so on who determine their identity and solidarity in various levels. In the early period, these

ethnic groups maintained their separate ethnic identities as well as they were living together in their common social life (Frerks & Klem, 2004). In past history, Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims were maintained their rigid relationship and they were fighting as unity for the independent of Sri Lanka against British colonial masters. Then ethnic relationship was broken by some collection of incidents in the past. Hence, this ethnic conflict had growth through some socio-economical and political circumstances of this country. Therefore, this study tries to emphasis the concept of ethnicity, ethnic relation, and the nature of ethnic relationship among ethnic groups those are living in the south eastern region of Ampara district in the post-war context consequently.

### **Problem Statement**

Before emerging the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, all ethnic groups were built their rapport wealthily. This relationship was collapsed by various factors. Therefore, this study basically gives a clear understanding of ethnic relation among different ethnic groups in order to understand the historical causes that influenced to destroy their stretched relationship, and scrutinize how the relationship is reorganized among ethnic groups, especially in the post war context in the south eastern region of Ampara district, Sri Lanka.

### **Objectives**

The key objective of this study is to conceptualize the idea of ethnicity and ethnic relation and to understand the ethnic relationship in the south eastern region of Ampara district through the history.

Further, this study tries to examine the current situation of ethnic cohesion among Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims in south eastern region of Ampara district.

### **Methodology**

This is primarily a qualitative study. Data have collected from primary as well as secondary sources. To collect secondary data, the research articles, magazines, electronic sources and literatures have used. The primary data have gathered through questionnaire (50: based on simple random sampling method), and two (2) focus group discussions (FGD) with the participation of local people and social activists. In addition to this, the data have also been collected from the structured interview with key informants.

### **Conceptualizing Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations**

Sociology is at the hub of the human sciences concerned with racial and ethnic relation, with relevant to many perspectives (Vera & Feagin, 2007). Within the social sciences, however, the usage has become more generalized to all human groups that explicitly regard themselves and are regarded by others as culturally distinctive. German sociologist Max Weber, who defined it as:

*“ ...those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists ”.*

Ethnicity is used in everyday language; it is actually a rather complex notion, which has evoked significant academic debate. Anthony Smith has defined an ethnic community as “a named human population with the myth of common ancestry, shared memories, and

cultural elements, a link with a historic territory or homeland, and a measure of solidarity (Smith, 1993). Though this provides us with some means to distinguish ethnicity from other terms like race, nation or tribe, such conceptual distinctions often remain problematic and unclear (Frerks & Klem, 2004).

In Sri Lanka, there is no official classification of ethnic groups, but there are some ethnic groups and minority groups where categorized based on religion, language, historical demographic ratio and other social settings. The distinction between Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims seems to be considered an essential ordering principle in Sri Lankan society. Though generally considered less relevant, the Burghers, Veddahs, Malays and any other groups small in number are normally mentioned to provide a complete picture of ethnicity.

### **Ethnic Relations**

Ethnic relation is the area of sociology that studies the social, political, and economic relations between races and ethnicities at all levels of society. This area encompasses the study of racism and of complex political interactions between members of different groups. The sociological analysis of race and ethnicity frequently interacts with other areas in the social sciences such as postcolonial theory and even, in relation to ethnic subcultures and musicology.

Relations among ethnic communities and between them and state may take many forms and occurred under a great variety of circumstances. Some ethnic communities claim homeland status, that they and their ancestors have occupied their homeland for generations and centuries, have stamped their distinctive culture on it settlement, cities, religious structures, and

burial grounds to the point that the land is believed to be their unique and sacred inheritance, never mind that they may have been relatively recent arrivals, displacing other people who were there before them (Esman, 2004).

In this chapter it can be determined that the basic patterns of race and ethnic relations are amalgamation (blending two or more groups into a society that reflects the cultural and biological traits of the group), assimilation, pluralism, structured inequality, population relocation and extermination.

Therefore, ethnic relation is much more important for every society to make it in a good position. And ethnic relationship should be developed among different ethnic or religious groups rather than the inferiority manner or minority perception. A member of an ethnic group has to share his feelings and culture with others those who are coming from another ethnic group. Ethnic relation helps person to know the culture, customs, values, rituals, language, and religious beliefs and practices of other community. Because people are having different cultural practices compared to others, and another type of people are living with different ethnic group which has affable customs and culture.

So, nowadays, cultural exchange is also a new phenomenon among social scientists to discuss and doing research in the pasture. Every community is respectively willing to teach their members about the importance of ethnic relationship during their socialization process which helps them to realize their own culture and to classify their systems from others comparatively.

There is a question that is there any connection between ethnic relation and democratic politics? We can answer this; there is a coin connection between politics and democracy. The good ethnic relation is

the reflection of the democratic politics which aim to give equal opportunities for all communities within the territory. For instant, in Sri Lanka, every civil society is thinking how to rebuild the ethnic relation between groups with high communal efforts. After end of the civil war, the government of Sri Lanka also tries to make the ethnic harmony among all communities in the island from North to South, free from terrorism, fear and tension situation.

To implement full democratic political practice in any country, every political leaders and civil organizations have to mobilize different ethnic groups in to a common pool constructively. At the same time, each member of the ethnic group also has to respect other ethnic or minority group without any hesitation and doubtful circumstances or prejudice manner.

Ethnic relation is helping to establish new ideas of democracy and it gives spaces to implement valuable progress focusing the betterment or wellbeing of the individual, family and social groups. In a country, the government should Build up social harmony

- Plane Development activities
- Rule people in the democratic path
- Give equal opportunity for all citizens of the country in employment, education and social prospects etc.
- Formulate welfare policy for public
- Provide assistance and social support for all victims and vulnerabilities, and
- Protect the nation from terrorism and violent situations

To make these all arrangements every society need an excellent strengthen

relationship, especially in the multi-ethnic societies like India and Sri Lanka. Therefore, all scholars are pointing out that the ethnic relation is essential and it should be an exceptional for the betterment of the community or country in the world.

### **South Eastern Coastal Region: A Brief Introduction**

Ampara district is located in the south-east of Sri Lanka in the Eastern province (Figure 1). It is one of three administrative districts in the Eastern Province which was separated from Batticaloa district in 1961 (Kaleel, 2003). It has an area of 4,415 square kilometers (1,704.6 sq. met) and has population of 648,057 (Census, 2012). South Eastern coastal region is covers 13 Divisional Secretariats as follow;

1. Kalmunai (Muslim Division)
2. Kalmunai (Tamil Division)
3. Sainthamaruthu
4. Sammanthurai
5. Nintavur
6. Navithanveli
7. Irakkamam
8. Karaithivu
9. Addalaichenai
10. Akkaraipattu
11. Thirukkivil
12. Aalyadivembu
13. Pottuvil

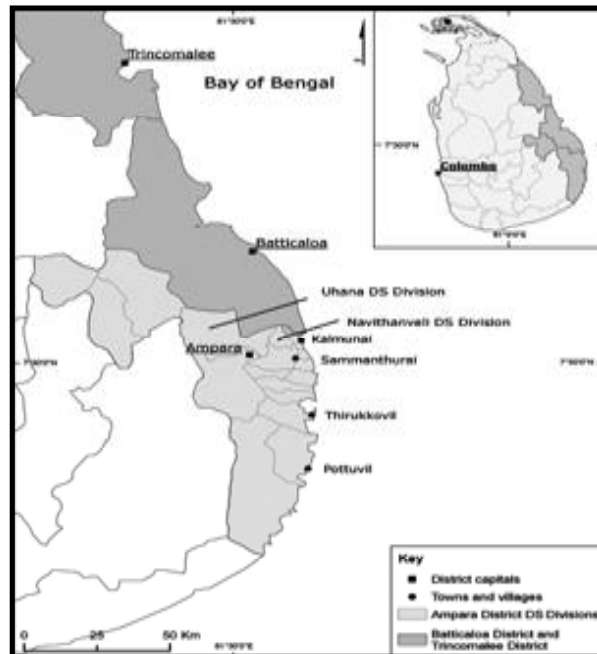
Following figure clearly shows the location of the South Eastern region of Ampara district which is the study area.

Ampara district has 20 local authorities of which two are Municipal Councils, one is an Urban Councils and the remaining 17 are Pradeshya Sabhas (Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Council, 2011).

Among them there are two municipal councils and eleven pradeshiya saba comes under south eastern coastal region. This district is covered by Periyaneelavanai in North, Panama in South, Ampara town in West and Bay of Bengal in the East. The costal areas, Kalmunai, Sammanthurai,

Nintavur, Addalaichenai, Akkaraipattu and Pottuvil villages are dominated by Muslims. It is rich in natural resources like water and fertile land. Because of this, the district is known as 'Store of Paddy in East' (Jameel, 1997). In addition, sea is in its east side and

**Figure: 1**  
**Ampara District: location of the Study Area**



huge paddy lands in its west side. Most of the people in this region work in paddy lands and commercial establishments. Some of them work in government and non-governmental organizations and in small industries.

The district is one of the most diverse in Sri Lanka, both ethnically and religiously. This is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural district. Sinhale, Muslim and Tamil are the three major communities living in the district and the ethnic ratio is 43.59 % Muslim, 38.73 % of Sinhalese and 17.40 % of Tamil, 0.13% of Burgher and 0.15 %

of others in 2012 (Census, 2012). The Sinhalese largely live in the great majority of the interior area of the district, while the Tamil and Muslim populations are located mainly along coastal belt, often in close proximity.

## Results and Discrssim

We look at this situation to understand the condition of relationship between deferent ethnic groups in the area of research. This title talks about the present position (social manner) of each communities living together in several areas of the south eastern coastal

region of the Ampara district. The study used the direct observation, personal experience and the key informant interview with people who know the real fact about this area and its present position in terms of ethnic harmony.

In early period, before 2004, people conflicted based on land (cultivation land) issues between Tamils and Muslims. Example, in Pottuvil divisional secretariat area Tamils and Muslims were consequently competitive for their land for many years. But now it is come to an agreement level. On the other hand, Muslims and Tamils needed separate hospital for each ethnic community. For instant, in Kalmunai there was a Base hospital commonly. But, Muslims were thinking that this hospital is predominant by Tamils and it situated in the area where Tamils were majority. At the same time, Muslims also requested late minister (MHM. Asraff) for the separate hospital which should be established in Muslim dominant area in Kalmunai. Then Asraff memorial hospital was established in the south part of the Kalmunai Municipal area, this is also as a result of ethnic manner and ethnic fear of one group from another.

Another important thing is that Tamils and Muslim in Kalmunai municipality area, they requested for separate administrative body for them. As a result of this, there are two Divisional Secretariat divisions such as Kalmunai Muslim division, and Kalmunai Tamil division were established. These types of events were happening during the early period.

But, after end of civil war, in this present situation it can be seen a quiet and peaceful environment in this research area.

- People can travel to visit any area without fearing of terrorism and arm conflict or civil fight

- They collaborate with other communities in any situation and for any purpose as they were in earlier
- Civil societies are promoting people to work and live together
- Many civil societies and other non-governmental organizations are generating and facilitating the ethnic group or communities to understand each other and the significant of ethnic relationship
- Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims are living without fear from any tension and terrorist activities. This situation creates a peaceful environment for all communities (Fazil, MM).

But, in some situations, people confused on this present political circumstances. Some time the activities of the government will create Sinhala dominant social structure or set up (people feel). Dr. Dammika Herath pointed out in his research that;

*“Muslims are living with severe tension and fear about Sinhalese in terms of resettlement activities of the Sri Lanka government. People think that these resettlement activities (resettlement project of Deegavapiya in Ampara district) may help to increase the population of Sinhalese in Ampara district which is dominant by Muslims at present”*

Thus, these kinds of activities create different thinking among Muslim and Tamil communities in general. Because, the past Gal-oya project is very important evident for Tamils and Muslims to remain the resettlement of Sinhalese from South and other regions of the island. (Fazil, MM., and A. Sarjoon)

In such a way, the

- Oluvil port project (Deegavapiya is very closed to Oluvil)
- Entrance of Sinhala students to the South Eastern University
- Initiation for Sub Divisional Secretariat for Deegavapiya (Deegavapiya administrative under Addalaichenai D.S. division at present)
- Karuna's activities to propose new administrative territory for Tamils wrap in Periyaneelawanai and some part from Kalmunai town.

Through these aforementioned activities, Muslims as well as Tamils feel that these all will be challenged for their self determination and future potential. They feel that the Tamils and Muslims will be excluded from social, economic and political strengthen in future (Fazil, MM).

Muslims and Tamils are living efficiently in this situation in Ampara district although they have some fears and tensions as we discussed above. They all come to a good development environment as well. For instant:

- Development of their wellbeing
- Livelihood development
- Free from tension and fears
- Smoothness on day-to-day life
- Safe from destroying properties and other sympathies
- They are able to go to their paddy lands
- Free from terrorism and conflict, and
- Peaceful environment for enjoyable life

Anyhow, the tension will be reduced in near future, because attitude change and structural changes are very important factors to rebuild the relationship among these three communities. Three ethnic groups or communities have given a good atmosphere, after end of the civil war, for survival wellbeing. It is fact that we all have to accept in this situation without any doubt.

#### **Relationship between ethnic groups**

- The relationship between Tamils and Muslims were very cordial not only in Southeastern coastal region but also in the whole eastern province.
- Tamils and Sinhalese speak different languages; there were close interaction between them. Especially, Tamils and Sinhalese in Ampara district interacted in terms of culture and arts.
- Relations between Sinhalese and Muslims are especially intense in the research area.

#### **Disparities between ethnic groups**

- Disparities between Muslims and Tamils emerged only after 1980s. The main cause for the disparities is the land problems.
- Tamils and Sinhalese were together in many activities for long time. The planned activities of the majority group damaged this relationship. The disparities between them started with the launching of Gal-oya dam scheme.
- A strong relationship existed between Sinhala Muslim communities for a long time in elsewhere in Sri Lanka including Ampara district. However, it has started deteriorating during the recent past, particularly after civil war, due to various reasons.

Aforementioned findings we gain from this study to understand the relationship and disparities among different ethnic groups in the South Eastern coastal region of Ampara district.

## Conclusion

In Sri Lanka, after civil war we have to realize the relationship among Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslims and to deal with disparities among these three communities in the recent past. Hence, this study focused on the concept of ethnicity, ethnic relation and significance of ethnic relationship, deferent types of ethnic groups those are living in the south eastern coastal region of Ampara district. In past history, Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims were maintained their rigid relationship and they were fighting as unity for the independent of Sri Lanka against British colonial masters. Then ethnic relationship was broken by some collection of incidents in past. So, this ethnic conflict had growth through some socio-economical and political circumstances of this country.

## Recommendations

To sustain the relationship among ethnic groups it can be suggested some important recommendations as follow:

- Make some innovative awareness program for all communities in terms of ethnic harmony to mobilize them into a common social scenario.
- Enlighten the significant of ethnic relation among three communities, not only in this research area but in every part of the island.
- Systematize the link program which should be connected people from different ethnic groups and communities.

- To interact people, it can be constructed some research activities (joint research) within societies and regional and national level.
- Organize inter cultural programs in order to understand culture, religion, feelings and social sentiment of each other.
- Remove prejudice mentality or discrimination from every ethnic group.
- Implement co-existence programs which cover all types of ethnic communities in future to avoid the feeling of exclusion or misunderstanding.
- Civil societies should be made some appropriate preparations in terms of organize people to build a good rapport harmfully.

The government or non-governmental organizations and community based organizations can implement above recommendations to preserve a cordial relationship among all communities and ethnic groups in the study area. After end of civil war, we have given a harmful situation in Sri Lanka. Every citizen of this country can go to paddy field, school, market, and anywhere without fear and tensions. Security also very tighten to protect and safe people from fear and terrorism. So, the government of Sri Lanka also observing every moment of socio, political activities in terms of providing the safeness and healthy situation for all communities in the country. Through this study, it can be understood that ethnic relation is much more important for every society to make it in a superior position. And ethnic relationship should be developed among different ethnic or religious groups rather than the inferiority manner or minority perception. Then only we will be able to build up a matured community in Sri Lanka toward positive peace and the developmental standard in near future.



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