

Draft Paper

Politics of Ethnicity and Population Censuses in Sri Lanka

Kalinga Tudor Silva
Department of Sociology
University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Population censuses have a long history in Sri Lanka. The earliest reported enumeration of people in Sri Lanka was in the Dutch period. In 1779, the Dutch governor Van de Graff ordered a census of population in the coastal regions under their control. The first country wide population census was conducted in 1824 under the regime of the British governor Sir Edward Barnes. The coverage of this census, however, was incomplete and the reported population in the entire country was 850,000. The first systematic countrywide population census to be organized along modern principles was conducted in 1871 under the direction of W.J. MacCarthy, the Registrar General in the British colonial regime in Ceylon. The tradition of decennial censuses began since then.

The original population censuses in Sri Lanka were primarily concerned with demographic variables like size and age and sex composition of the population, its spatial distribution and certain socio-economic characteristics. Counting of the population by communal and racial categories, however, was significant for various purposes. Universal franchise was established in British Ceylon as far back as 1931 and as politics increasingly took the character of identity politics particularly after country's political independence from Britain in 1948. Focusing on the country's two latest population censuses held in 1981 and 2001, this paper examines how censuses and information generated by them increasingly became a basis for claims and counter claims in asserting the identities and rights of various groups within the arena of national and regional politics and how the census process and its outcomes in turn were affected by politics of nationalism and ethnicity in more recent decades.

The specific issues explored in the paper are as follows:

- The definition of ethnicity used in each census and its implications for understanding the results of the censuses.
- What ethnic categories have been used in the actual implementation of the censuses process and to what extent it serves the interests of ethnic majorities and minorities in the country.
- How census information is used and abused by various interested parties in order to achieve their political and social goals

- How censuses handle ethnic hybridity, children of interethnic marriages and those who seek to change their identity in given situations
- Implications of internal and international migration caused by war, natural disasters and economic and political insecurity prevailing in the country for analysis of census data
- The attitudes of the state, LTTE and other key stakeholders towards population censuses and their results

An Overview of Population Censuses in Sri Lanka

From 1871 to 2001, when the last population census was conducted in Sri Lanka, a total of 13 censuses were conducted in Sri Lanka as spelled out in Table 1.

Table 1: Population Census in Sri Lanka by Year and Population

Census Year	Total Population (000)	Coverage
1871	2,324	All island
1881	2,759	All island
1891	3,007	All island
1901	3,565	All island
1911	4,106	All island
1921	4,498	All island
1931		Colombo only
1946	6,657	All island
1953	8,097	All island
1963	10,582	All island
1971	12,689	All island
1981	14,846	All island
2001	16,929	Excludes most of NE

From 1871 to 1921 five censuses were taken at a regular interval of 10 years. Due to the worldwide economic depression in 1931 and its impact the 1931 census was limited to Colombo city with a mere count taken in the rest of Sri Lanka. The census due to be taken in 1941 was postponed to 1946 due to the second-world war. The census due in 1951 was actually taken in 1953 due to a paper shortage caused by the Korean war. Similarly the decennial census scheduled for 1961 was actually conducted in 1963 due to some logistic difficulties. The 1971 census conducted exactly 100 years after the first systematic population in the country reestablished pattern of taking the census in the first year of a new decade. The next census was conducted as scheduled in 1981, but from 1981 to 2001 no census was conducted due to escalation of an ethnic war in the country since 1983. When the 13th census in the country was finally conducted it was limited to 18 out of 25 districts in the country due to continuing insecurity in Tamil dominated North-east regions in the country.

The censuses in Sri Lanka are conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics, using powers vested in it under the Census Ordinance of 1960 as amended in later years. As an official activity of the state, it is implemented through the state machinery controlled by the ruling parties increasingly identified with the majority ethnic group in the country. The Census categories used in turn reflect the views and interests of such ruling parties.

Categorizations and Concepts Used

The categorizations of populations used in national censuses have evolved from the colonial era. They indicate the manner in which census authorities and the colonial state in general conceptualized and dealt with the rich diversity among population in the country. All regional censuses taken before 1871 primary category used in delineating groups among the natives was caste. From 1871 to 1901 the population was classified on the basis of nationalities and races; 78 nationalities and 24 races were identified for census purposes. There was some inconsistency and confusion in the categorizations used. Sinhalese and Tamils were races as well as nationalities. The term nationality was also used to designate groups which were numerically too small or too insignificant to be called races (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999). The low-country Sinhalese and the Kandyan Sinhalese were separated for census purposes with the result that no communal group was in an overwhelming majority. The term “race” replaced “nationality” in all censuses from 1911 right up to 1963. This in turn reflected an attempt on the part of colonial rulers to impose a certain racial imagination with strong ideological roots in European thinking at the time on the local population and map Sri Lanka society on that basis. The 78 nationalities thus became reduced to 7 races: Europeans, Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Malays, Veddahs and Others. As Rajasingham-Senanayake (1999) argues “The colonial census reveals a systematic simplification of the diversity of the islands people and culture by scholars and British colonial administrators” (1999:112).

To quote Wickramasinghe (1995)

“There was a tremendous amount of experimentation on categories. When the British officials choose to delineate groups within the native population and refer to them as castes, nationalities, races or communal groups, the term used was never innocent or fortuitous; it reflected an understanding of the differences prevalent amidst the people of Ceylon. Throughout British rule in spite of the vagaries in the categories chosen, the underlying principle remained the same; natives were members of a distinct group, their behavior, needs, features were those of the group”

Race came to signify assumed inherent physical qualities of a group as well as its distinctive ways of thinking and acting as proposed by emerging racial

theories in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. It is interesting that the term nationality was adopted by colonial officials in the middle of the 19th century when nationalities were awakening in Western Europe. However, the term nationality was replaced by race from 1911 census. Dunham, who was responsible for implementing the 1911 census mentioned in the 1911 census report,

In spite of the former use of the word 'nationality', it cannot be regarded as an appropriate description of the various peoples in Ceylon. The races in Ceylon are clearly differentiated – intermarriage between them have been very rare; they have each their own particular religion to which the large majority belong and speak different languages. (Dunham 1911).

Thus what were merely cultural distinctions between Sinhalese and Tamils came to be recognized as biological distinctions with dangerous implications for new identity formation. The race ideology ensured the inherent superiority of the colonizer and identified multiple weaknesses of the natives as inborn characteristics. Each race was ascribed a natural affinity for a specific type of work. For instance, labor imported from South India was considered best for plantation work. On the other hand the indolence of the Sinhalese received much attention. A British Civil servant found in 1901 that “the low-country Sinhalese are a handsome and well made race and their appearance and character are gentle rather than bold or hardy. .. They are by no means deficient to quickness or talents and when educated make good scholars....They have naturally a great aptitude for figures and readily acquire a knowledge of maths...The Kandynas are hardier and more robustthough of the same race...The spirit of independence is highly developed in the Kandyans and their attachment to their hereditary lands extraordinary”. (quoted in Wickramasinge 1995:14).

The term ethnicity gradually replaced race since 1971 census. This implies that identity based on language, religion and other cultural specificities rather than assumed racial differences became important in distinguishing people and groups from one another. The distinction between race and ethnicity, however was more apparent than real, as an element of distinct racial origins continued to drive ethnic polarization. All communal identities; caste, nationality, race and ethnicity, are translated into Sinhala as “jatiya” (literally “group born into”) leading to some continuity in local conceptions in spite of changes in official terminology in English. The fluidity of communal identities characteristic of the pre-colonial period more or less disappeared during the British period. By 1956 the population was more or less permanently divided along ethnic lines and particularly after the nationwide ethnic riots of 1983 whatever cultural bridges that existed between Sinhalese and Tamils further eroded..

Social, cultural and assumed racial diversity in the country was captured in all population censuses since 1871. In the pre 1871 censuses limited to certain regions, caste was the primary basis for differentiating local population. The term “race” replaced “nationality” in all censuses from 1911 right up to 1963. This in turn reflected an attempt on the part of colonial rulers to impose a certain racial imagination with strong ideological roots in European thinking at the time on the local population and map Sri Lanka society on that basis. The 78 nationalities thus became reduced to 7 races: Europeans, Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Malays, Veddahs and Others. As Rajasingham-Senanayake argues “The colonial census reveals a systematic simplification of the diversity of the islands people and culture by scholars and British colonial administrators” (1999:112). The term ethnicity gradually replaced race since 1971 census. This implies that identity based on language, religion and other cultural specificities rather than assumed racial differences became important in distinguishing people and groups from one another. The distinction between race and ethnicity, however was more apparent than real, as an element of distinct racial origins continued to drive ethnic polarization. The fluidity of communal identities characteristic of the earlier period had disappeared by 1971 and the population was more or less permanently divided along ethnic lines particularly after the nationwide ethnic riots of 1983.

1981 Population Census in Sri Lanka

The Census of Population and Housing conducted in 1981 was the last countrywide population census to be held in Sri Lanka. This was conducted at a time when ethnic consciousness in the population was high and the political leaders in control of the state came from the majority ethnic group Sinhalese. In the population censuses taken from 1901 to 1971 Kandyan Sinhalese and Low-country Sinhalese were treated as two separate groups. In fact the Kandyans were the first to campaign for a federal system in Sri Lanka somewhere in the 1930s, claiming that they want to retain a degree of independence. There was an increased trend towards political unification of Kandyan and Low-country Sinhalese from 1940s onwards. In 1981 for census purposes the two groups were merged for the first time. Reportedly this was done due to increased intermixture of the two communities at the ground level. This, however, had the effect of increasing the numerical strength of the combined Sinhala population. Veddahs (the aboriginal people of Sri Lanka) and Europeans were included as separate racial groups in censuses upto 1963 but enumerating them as separate groups ceased in 1963 as they were losing their numerical significance. They were classified as “Others” from 1963 onwards.

The 1981 census classified the population into six ethnic groups: Sinhalese, Sri Lanka Tamil, Indian Tamil, Sri Lanka Moor, Burgher, Malay and other. A person’s own response regarding his ethnic affiliation was accepted by the

enumerators. The guidelines for enumerators mentioned “From the person’s name you may be able to guess his ethnic group. However as further as “Are you Sri Lanka Tamil or Indian Tamil?” as required”. The guidelines further added “Tamils or Indian origin should be recorded as Indian Tamil even though they or their parents may have obtained Sri Lanka citizenship”. As has been the practice in all censuses so far, in the case of children of a mixed parentage, the father’s ethnic identity was identified as the ethnic identity of the children as well.

Table 2: Population in Sri Lanka by Ethnic Group, 1981

Ethnic Group	Number	Percent
Sinhalese	10,979,561	74.0
Sri Lanka Tamil	1,886,872	12.7
Indian Tamil	818,658	5.5
Sri Lanka Moor	1,046,926	7.0
Burgher	39,374	0.3
Malay	46,963	0.3
Other	28,398	0.2
Total	14,846,750	

Source: Census of Population and Housing 1981

The 1981 census reported that “The people of Sri Lanka comprise predominantly of Sinhalese and a few other ethnic groups”. The Sinhala domination in the country was apparent from the fact that nearly three-fourth of the total population in the country belonged to this ethnic group. In the eyes of the nationalist Sinhalese this in turn justified political domination of the country by this majority ethnic group.

The census process, however, involved several possible distortions.

First, the requirement for the children of mixed parentage to be classified under the ethnic affiliation of the father was likely to hide hybridity, which has been identified as an important feature of the country’s population, society and culture for many centuries. This may be seen as an instance where ethnic purity is simply invented in actual examples of ethnic intermixture and plurality (Silva 2002). The possible effect of this phenomenon for over counting or undercounting of certain ethnic communities is not clear from the available data. The gender implications of this procedure is also problematic. One possibility would have been to give the children the option to declare their identity. Another would have been to count them as of mixed ethnicity.

Second, the guideline for enumerators to guess the ethnicity of the respondents by considering the name of the person is also highly problematic as name

changing has been an important aspect of hiding ethnic minority status particularly in Sinhala dominant urban areas (Silva 1999). This too is likely to reduce the actual numerical strength of the minorities, Sri Lanka and Indian Tamils in particular.

Third, it is significant that while an ethnic unification of Low-country Sinhalese and Kandyan Sinhalese has been achieved for census purposes, the distinction between Sri Lanka and Tamils and Indian Tamils have been retained sometimes rather tenuously. For instance, the guidelines for enumerators specifically mention that those of recent Indian origin must not be counted as Sri Lanka Tamils even if they claim so. This is contradictory with the provision that the self identification of the respondents is what matters when it comes to ethnic identity. Further, even though the cultural, political and socio-economic differences between Sri Lanka Tamils and Indian Tamils are quite significant. Tamils of Indian origin have mixed with native Tamils in some areas such as Vanni where some of the former plantation workers had moved partly due to ethnic violence they suffered in some of the plantation areas. On the whole the census categories tend to perpetuate some of the ethnic divisions while the same census redefinitions have reinforced the numerical dominance of the majority ethnic group.

Fourth, the reclassification of some of the smaller ethnic groups under the other category tends to strengthen the bipolar ethnic demarcation (Sinhala-Tamil divide) that has surfaced as the primary fault line in the country's population.

2001 Population Census in Sri Lanka

The 2001 census was conducted twenty years after the previous census due to logistic difficulties in conducting the census in war-affected northern and eastern parts of the country. When a census was finally conducted in 2001, it could not cover many of the areas controlled by rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam who, due to a variety of considerations, did not want the Government of Sri Lanka to have accurate information about the population in the areas under their control. The 2001 census covered 18 out of the 25 districts in Sri Lanka.

As far as ethnic categories used are concerned there were only two important changes in the 2001 census compared to the 1981 census. This has to do with addition of two minority ethnic groups, Sri Lanka Chetty and Bharatha, as census categories. This was in response to representations made by these two groups to President J.R. Jayawardena requesting that they be represented in the census. Even though these two groups are miniscule, perhaps due to their economic significance (particularly Sri Lanka Chetty are known as rich business people), they managed to have accepted as census categories. Even though other similarly small but historically important ethnic groups such as Veddahs

have gradually disappeared from the census, these new groups managed to gain recognition as census categories.

Table 3: Population in Sri Lanka by Ethnic Group, 2001

Ethnic Group	Actual Number	Percent	Estimated	Percent
Sinhalese	13,876,245	82.0	14,011,734	74.5
Sri Lanka Tamil	732,149	4.3	2,233,624	11.9
Indian Tamil	855,025	5.1	859,052	4.6
Sri Lanka Moor	1,339,331	7.9	1,561,910	8.3
Burgher	35,283	0.2	38,388	0.2
Malay	54,782	0.3	55,352	0.3
Other	36,842	0.2	37,197	0.2
Total	16,929,689	100.0	18,797,257	100.0

Source: Census of Population and Housing 2001

As the census could not be conducted in the LTTE controlled areas, it is quite clear that the Sri Lanka Tamil population is vastly underreported in the 2001 census figures. The estimated figures seek to adjust for the non-coverage of predominantly Tamil areas. The pattern of Sinhala dominance is further reinforced both in the actual census figures and in estimated figures. The large scale migration of Sri Lanka Tamils to other countries, including Canada, has had the effect of downsizing the Sri Lanka Tamil population in Sri Lanka. There is also notable reduction of percentage of Indian Tamil population in the country. The exodus of some Indian Tamil refugees to India since 1980s may be partly responsible for this trend. There is also a possibility that the declaration of Indian Tamils as Sri Lanka Tamils was more pronounced in 1981 census and that has decreased in 2001 due to increased vigilance on the part of enumerators to prevent this tendency.

When the preliminary results of the census was released to the press, there was considerable curiosity as to why relative size of the Muslim population increased as revealed in the census. The higher fertility levels among the Muslims and deliberate avoidance of family planning due to some pressures from the community leaders were mentioned as important factors. More systematic analysis of fertility trends among various ethnic groups, however, did not reveal that there are significant differences in fertility levels among different ethnic communities in the country (Abeykoon 2001). The reported increase in the size of the Muslim population may be partly an artifact of the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from much of the Northern Province in 1990 and their resulting migration to other areas in the country, Puttlam district in particular. As a result while their original home areas could not be covered by the census due to embargo

imposed by the LTTE, they were actually counted in the census as many of them were concentrated in Puttlam district. How far this Muslim migration was factored in the population estimates for 2001 is not clear from the data.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The population censuses were an important tool employed by the state from the colonial era to establish its authority over the citizens. The enumeration of social and cultural groups was done in such a way that the identities that were fluid and changeable became more or less fixed due to the census categories adopted, the official and at the same time public recognition of such categories for various purposes, including distribution of state resources, political mobilization and social activism. The racial and ethnic identities propagated by population censuses sometimes took a life of their own giving rise to formation of rigid and scientifically sanctioned social identities. In the meantime the census process itself has been increasingly affected by ethnic polarization and ethnic confrontation in the country, with each ethnic group becoming more conscious of its size and distribution and seeking to influence the process of census taking and its outcomes by declaring or not declaring certain identities. In the same way the Sinhala dominated state sought to influence the census outcomes, for instance by erasing the distinction between Low-country and Kandyan Sinhalese, the LTTE too influenced the census outcome by preventing census taking in areas controlled by them.

In order to enhance the validity and reliability of census results regarding ethnic composition etc. the following suggestions can be made.

1. Retain wherever possible fluidity of ethnic and social identities by focusing more on issues like ethnic intermixture.
2. Self-identification used by the respondents must be used as far as possible with an explanatory note where necessary.
3. More attention must be paid to population migration and displacement in future censuses.
4. The Department of Census and Statistics must promote analysis of census data on topics such as ethnicity, religion and multiculturalism by different stakeholders.
5. Ways to secure support of rebel organizations such as LTTE for census and related research activities must be explored with the participation of international mediators and development actors.

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