

Meaningful Citizenship for Hill Country Tamils in Sri Lanka through Education: Re-examining History Textbooks for Multiculturalism and Co-existence in a Multi Ethnic Society

Prabath Ekanayake^{1*}
Department of Education
University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
prabathedu@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study explores how history textbooks in Sri Lankan schools represent the Hill Country Tamil community and examines the impact of these portrayals on students' sense of citizenship and belonging. Through analysis of textbooks, teacher interviews, and classroom observations, the research finds that the curriculum overwhelmingly emphasizes Sinhala-Buddhist narratives, while largely marginalizing or misrepresenting the histories, struggles, and contributions of the Hill Country Tamils. This exclusion reinforces symbolic and cultural inequalities, undermining the development of inclusive citizenship and inter-ethnic understanding in a society still recovering from conflict. The study recommends significant reforms to the history curriculum, teacher training, and textbook content to better reflect Sri Lanka's diversity and support reconciliation, social cohesion, and meaningful citizenship for all communities.

Keywords: History Education, Hill Country Tamils, Citizenship, Multiculturalism, Reconciliation.

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is a diverse society with a rich history influenced by various factors such as migration, trade, conquest, and colonialism. The population consists of different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural groups, including Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays, and Indigenous peoples. However, the nation-building process in Sri Lanka has often emphasized a singular ethno-national narrative, primarily focusing on Sinhala-Buddhist identity (Jayawardena, 1985; DeVotta, 2004). This approach has had significant implications for citizenship, belonging, and political engagement, especially for minority communities. Education, particularly history education, has played a crucial role in shaping and legitimizing these national narratives.

Education systems do more than just transmit knowledge; they actively shape social identities, political values, and collective memory. Scholars like Apple (2019), Giroux (2011), and Banks (2017) argue that curricula are not neutral or objective. Instead, they reflect dominant power relations and political interests within the state. History textbooks, as state-sanctioned texts, hold significant influence as they determine whose histories are valued, whose contributions are recognized, and whose experiences are marginalized or erased. In multi-ethnic societies recovering from violent conflicts, these choices in representation become even more crucial (Cole, 2007; Paulson, 2015).

Sri Lanka's post-independence history demonstrates how exclusionary historical narratives can lead to social division and conflict. After gaining independence in 1948, the government promoted Sinhala language, culture, and Buddhism as the defining elements of national identity, marginalizing minority groups, especially Tamils (Kearney, 1967; Tambiah, 1992). This policy fueled ethnic tensions that escalated into a civil war lasting nearly three decades between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 to 2009. Despite the formal end of the war in 2009, scholars recognize that persistent structural inequalities, unresolved grievances, and conflicting historical narratives hinder reconciliation and sustainable peace efforts (Uyangoda, 2011; Goodhand, 2010).

The quest for meaningful citizenship for the Hill Country Tamils (Malaiyaha Tamils) of Sri Lanka, a community historically marginalized by colonial indentured labor systems and post-

independence exclusionary policies, continues to be a crucial but unresolved issue within the island's prolonged post-war reconciliation and nation-building efforts.

Within this broader context, history education plays a crucial yet contested role. Research shows that Sri Lankan history textbooks have frequently promoted mono-ethnic, triumphalist narratives that highlight ancient Sinhala civilization while downplaying or selectively presenting minority histories (Perera, 1999; Wijesuriya, 2015). These representations not only shape students' historical perspectives but also impact their views on citizenship, legitimacy, and coexistence in the present. As Pingel (2010) points out, history textbooks can act as "silent diplomats," either perpetuating divisions or fostering mutual understanding based on how they interpret the past.

The main objective of this study is to analyze how history textbooks in Sri Lankan schools portray Hill Country Tamils and their impact on fostering meaningful citizenship in a multi-ethnic society. The study will scrutinize the narratives, language, and themes in these textbooks to determine their influence on students' awareness of multiculturalism, social inclusion, and peaceful coexistence. By examining the role of history education in shaping civic identity, inter-ethnic understanding, and a sense of belonging among students from different ethnic backgrounds in Sri Lanka, the research aims to shed light on the broader implications of history education.

This study has several interconnected research objectives. Firstly, it aims to analyze the representation of Hill Country Tamils in national and provincial history textbooks used in Sri Lankan schools, focusing on their visibility, accuracy, and narrative framing. Secondly, the study aims to evaluate the extent to which current history textbooks promote multicultural values, inclusivity, and respect for ethnic diversity through their content, perspectives, and pedagogical methods. Thirdly, it seeks to understand how students' perceptions of citizenship, identity, and inter-ethnic relations are influenced by history education and textbook narratives. Fourthly, the research intends to identify any gaps, omissions, or biases in textbook content that may impede the development of meaningful citizenship and mutual understanding among ethnic groups. Finally, the study aims to propose informed recommendations for revising textbooks and teaching approaches to foster multiculturalism, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society.

Despite Sri Lanka's rich ethnic diversity, history education has been criticized for presenting selective narratives that prioritize majority perspectives and marginalize minority communities. The Hill Country Tamils, an important yet historically disadvantaged ethnic group, are often misrepresented or omitted in mainstream school history textbooks. These biased representations can shape students' perceptions of national history, citizenship, and belonging, reinforcing exclusion and ethnic hierarchies. This can negatively impact inter-ethnic relations and hinder meaningful participation in a multicultural society. There is a need for a systematic investigation into how history textbooks portray Hill Country Tamils and the implications for citizenship education, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka.

The main question of the study is how history textbooks in Sri Lanka represent Hill Country Tamils and what implications these representations have for promoting meaningful citizenship, multiculturalism, and peaceful co-existence in a multi-ethnic society. The study also explores several sub-questions to address the central research problem. Firstly, it investigates how the history, culture, and socio-economic contributions of Hill Country Tamils are portrayed in school history textbooks. Secondly, it examines the extent to which these textbooks reflect principles of multiculturalism, inclusivity, and respect for ethnic diversity in both content and perspective. Thirdly, the study explores how students from different ethnic backgrounds interpret and respond to the representations of Hill Country Tamils in history textbooks. Fourthly, it investigates educators' perceptions of the strengths and limitations of existing history textbooks in fostering inclusive citizenship and inter-ethnic understanding. Finally, the study considers potential changes to textbook content and teaching practices to enhance multicultural understanding and promote peaceful co-existence among Sri Lanka's diverse ethnic communities.

2. Literature review

2.1 Education and Nation Building in Sri Lanka

Since gaining independence, Sri Lanka has made significant investments in public education. The implementation of free education has played a crucial role in expanding access and improving literacy levels across different social classes. The National Education Commission emphasizes the importance of education in fostering unity, harmony, and respect for diversity, as outlined in policy documents dating back to the 1990s.

Education has been a cornerstone of nation-building in Sri Lanka, especially given the country's historical and contemporary challenges. Post-independence, the education system has undergone substantial reforms to promote inclusivity and accessibility, including the introduction of free education and compulsory schooling policies (Careemdeen, 2024). Education also serves as a means to cultivate national identity and social cohesion in a diverse society, addressing identity politics stemming from ethnic tensions, particularly between the Sinhalese and Tamils (Warnasuriya, 2019). The aftermath of the civil war underscores the importance of educational policies that prioritize equality and integration to facilitate national reconciliation and prevent future conflicts (Fiaz, n.d.). Moreover, education intersects with broader socio-political dynamics to address issues like gender equality and mental health, contributing to sustainable development and social equity (Kundi, 2024). A robust educational framework is essential for Sri Lanka's ongoing efforts in nation-building.

However, scholars like Wickramasinghe (2014) point out that education has also reinforced ethnic divisions. The majority of government schools teach in a single language, with Sinhala medium schools being more prevalent than Tamil medium schools, which are mostly located in specific regions. This segregation limits the interaction between students from different ethnic backgrounds. History education plays a significant role in this system as it is a compulsory subject at the secondary level. Every student, regardless of their background, learns about the national history through history textbooks. De Silva (2005) highlights that history serves as a potent tool in shaping national identity.

A large body of international research examines the relationship between history education and conflict. Bush and Saltarelli (2000) argue that education can either fuel division or promote peace depending on how knowledge is framed. In post conflict societies, history textbooks often become contested spaces where competing narratives struggle for dominance.

In South Asia, education has been instrumental in shaping national identity. Kumar (2001) illustrates how the history curriculum in India was utilized to foster a sense of national unity while also becoming a battleground for competing ideologies. This trend is also evident in Sri Lanka, as scholars like Warnasuriya (2018) reveal how history education reflects the complexities of identity politics in a diverse society. Studies on Sri Lanka consistently emphasize the prevalence of Sinhalese Buddhist perspectives in educational narratives. de Mel (2007) elucidates how cultural materials perpetuate the notion of majority ownership of the nation. Despite policy declarations, Wedikandage (2014) highlights the limited implementation of multicultural practices in schools.

Studies on Hill Country Tamils primarily focus on socio-economic conditions rather than educational content. Peebles (2001) documents the historical marginalization of plantation Tamils following independence, while Kurihara (2017) examines livelihood insecurity in estate communities. Ramesh (2022) highlights limited access to governance and public services. However, there is a lack of studies that explore how history education contributes to this marginalization. Smith (2009) argues that education research often prioritizes access over quality. This gap is particularly evident in plantation areas, where students attend school but are exposed to curricula that do not resonate with their lived experiences. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how history education influences citizenship among Hill Country Tamils.

2.2 The Hill Country Tamil Community and Citizenship

Hill Country Tamils arrived in Sri Lanka in the early nineteenth century to work on plantations established by British colonial rulers. Peebles (2001) explains that these workers were brought under harsh conditions and remained socially isolated. The Hill Country Tamil community in Sri Lanka has a complex relationship with citizenship, particularly following their historical statelessness until 2003. Balazo's research highlights that, despite the acquisition of citizenship, many Up-Country Tamils continue to experience a rural rights deficit and a pervasive sense of

exclusion from the political process, undermining the narrative of successful integration into Sri Lankan society (Balazo, 2017). This situation reflects broader themes of identity and belonging, as the community grapples with its cultural heritage amidst socio-political challenges. Additionally, the dynamics of Tamil nationalism, particularly in the context of the LTTE's influence, illustrate the shifting political landscape and the community's struggle for recognition and rights within a predominantly Sinhala-dominated state (Roberts, 2013). The interplay of these factors underscores the ongoing quest for meaningful citizenship and belonging among the Hill Country Tamils in Sri Lanka. After independence, citizenship laws excluded them from the political community. Many remained stateless for decades. Although citizenship rights were gradually restored, structural disadvantages persist. Neubert (2015) describes plantation life as a system of everyday control. Kurihara (2017) notes that poverty, poor housing, and limited educational resources continue to shape estate communities. Citizenship is not only a legal status. It also involves recognition and belonging. When national narratives ignore a community's history, citizenship remains incomplete. History education therefore plays a critical role in shaping meaningful citizenship for Hill Country Tamils.

2.3 Structure of the History Curriculum

The National Institute of Education is responsible for developing the national curriculum, including history textbooks that are produced centrally and distributed free of charge. The curriculum undergoes revision every eight years to update content and address gaps, but analysis of textbooks shows a lack of significant change. Warnasuriya (2018) points out that reforms often focus on adjusting the structure rather than the underlying narratives. History textbooks still emphasize ancient kingdoms, royal lineages, and Buddhist heritage, with the Mahavamsa holding a central position in the curriculum. However, scholars like de Silva (2005) caution against viewing the Mahavamsa as a complete national history, as it may promote an exclusive understanding of the past when presented without context.

The existing literature on history education and citizenship in Sri Lanka has identified significant issues such as ethnic bias, curriculum design, and national identity construction. However, there are critical gaps that need to be addressed. Firstly, there is a lack of research specifically focusing on the representation of Hill Country Tamils in historical narratives and how this impacts students' sense of identity and citizenship. Secondly, existing studies often analyze textbook content or teachers' perspectives, neglecting the importance of understanding students' own perceptions and experiences of learning history in a multi-ethnic setting. Thirdly, there is a need for empirical research that directly links textbook narratives to outcomes related to citizenship, multicultural understanding, and peaceful co-existence. Lastly, in the post-conflict context of Sri Lanka, there is an urgent need for context-sensitive research that explores how history education can promote inclusive citizenship and social cohesion, particularly for historically marginalized communities like Hill Country Tamils.

This study conducts a critical content and discourse analysis of prescribed history textbooks to explore how they portray or neglect the community's role in the colonial plantation economy and contemporary socio-political struggles. The research is situated within a socio-political framework that links educational historiography to the formation of national identity and the various aspects of citizenship, including legal rights, a sense of belonging, recognition, and a shared historical narrative. The goal of this reexamination is to promote a transformative educational perspective that advocates for a pluralistic and accurate historiography as a crucial step towards repairing the social fabric and fostering a genuinely inclusive and harmonious Sri Lankan society.

Meaningful citizenship goes beyond legal status to encompass social recognition, cultural inclusion, and fair participation in public life. Banks (2008) stresses the importance of democratic citizenship education addressing identity, power dynamics, and justice, especially in diverse societies. Marginalized communities' sense of citizenship hinges on whether state institutions, such as schools, acknowledge their histories, contributions, and everyday realities. When educational systems overlook or sideline certain groups, they implicitly convey that these groups hold a peripheral status within the nation (Osler & Starkey, 2005).

In Sri Lanka, the invisibility of Hill Country Tamils in national history textbooks exemplifies a significant challenge. Research shows that while textbooks extensively cover ancient kingdoms, colonial encounters, and nationalist movements, they give limited attention to the experiences of

plantation laborers, colonial migration, and post-independence citizenship struggles (Nesiah, 2012; Thanges, 2020). When Hill Country Tamils are mentioned, they are often depicted as passive laborers rather than as active historical figures who influenced the country's economic, social, and political development. These portrayals perpetuate hierarchical notions of belonging and hinder the formation of an inclusive national identity.

Multicultural education theory offers a valuable framework for addressing these issues. Scholars like Banks (2017), Parekh (2006), and Nieto (2010) advocate for the recognition of cultural diversity within national narratives and educational practices. Multicultural history education goes beyond adding minority perspectives as supplementary content; it involves a fundamental reexamination of dominant narratives, power relations, and assumptions about nationhood. In post-conflict societies, inclusive history education plays a crucial role in promoting reconciliation, empathy, and social cohesion (Cole & Barsalou, 2006).

Comparative studies from other multi-ethnic contexts support this argument. Research from post-apartheid South Africa, post-genocide Rwanda, and post-conflict Bosnia shows that history textbook reform can either perpetuate divisions or promote democratic transformation, depending on how it addresses past injustices and marginalized voices (Bentrovato, 2011; Freedman et al., 2008). These studies highlight that recognizing historical injustices and including diverse perspectives encourage critical thinking and mutual understanding among students.

In Sri Lanka, there is a growing recognition among scholars and policymakers of the importance of educational reform to promote reconciliation and coexistence (National Education Commission, 2003; Lopes Cardozo, 2015). Despite this awareness, progress in this area has been inconsistent. While policy documents now often mention ideas like social cohesion and peace education, the actual content of textbooks has not consistently aligned with these objectives (Samarasinghe, 2019). The persistent prevalence of ethnocentric narratives raises doubts about the government's dedication to fostering inclusive citizenship.

This study explores the representation of the Hill Country Tamil community in Sri Lankan history textbooks, focusing on the intersection of education, citizenship, and ethnic identity. By analyzing how these textbooks address or neglect this community, the study aims to shed light on how educational materials influence students' perceptions of belonging and coexistence in a diverse society. It contends that the exclusion of Hill Country Tamils from history education not only

perpetuates historical injustices but also hinders post-war reconciliation and democratic integration. The study advocates for a more inclusive and multicultural approach to curriculum development to promote a more equitable and harmonious society.

Additionally, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the educational challenges faced by Hill Country Tamils and the impact of historical and structural factors on their educational outcomes. By exploring the intersection of ethnicity, education, and social inequality, this study seeks to contribute to a broader discussion on inclusive and equitable education in Sri Lanka.

Overall, this research seeks to shed light on the experiences of Hill Country Tamils within the education system and advocate for policies and practices that promote their educational rights and opportunities. By amplifying the voices of this marginalized community, this study aims to foster greater awareness and understanding of the complexities of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka and the importance of addressing educational disparities to build a more inclusive society.

This study contributes to broader debates about the role of education in constructing inclusive national identities. It emphasizes the significance of history education that accurately portrays the experiences of all communities and fosters mutual respect, empathy, and shared responsibility. In a society still dealing with the impacts of colonialism, exclusion, and violence, rethinking history textbooks is not just an academic endeavor but a moral and political necessity.

Meaningful citizenship for Hill Country Tamils and all Sri Lankans hinges on the nation's education system moving beyond exclusionary narratives and embracing a pluralistic vision of the past. This study critically examines history textbooks through the lens of multiculturalism and coexistence to contribute to the ongoing struggle for justice, recognition, and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society.

3. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundations

This study uses a critical and interpretive framework to explore how history education in Sri Lanka influences the development of meaningful citizenship for Hill Country Tamils in a diverse society. History textbooks are seen as influential cultural and political tools that shape the relationship between the state, citizens, and national identity. The framework combines critical curriculum studies, multicultural education, citizenship theory, and postcolonial critique to examine how the content and structure of history textbooks impact the sense of belonging, recognition, and coexistence among different ethnic groups.

Rather than treating education as a neutral transmission of facts, this framework conceptualizes curriculum as a site of struggle where power, ideology, and identity intersect (Apple, 2019; Giroux, 2011). The framework positions history textbooks as the central analytical unit and examines their role in either enabling or constraining meaningful citizenship for marginalized communities, particularly Hill Country Tamils.

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

Critical Curriculum Theory

Critical curriculum theory serves as the foundational framework for this study. Scholars like Apple (2019) and Giroux (2011) argue that curricula are shaped by dominant social, political, and economic interests. The selection, organization, and legitimization of curriculum knowledge are controlled by those in power, leading to the inclusion and exclusion of content with ideological implications. From this perspective, history textbooks go beyond recounting past events; they actively shape narratives of nationhood, legitimacy, and belonging. The omission of marginalized groups in textbooks represents a form of symbolic exclusion that reinforces unequal power dynamics. This study employs critical curriculum theory to examine how Sri Lankan history textbooks prioritize certain historical figures and events while marginalizing the experiences of Hill Country Tamils.

Multicultural Education Theory

Multicultural education theory provides a normative framework for assessing inclusivity and equity in curriculum content. According to Banks (2008, 2017), multicultural education should go beyond superficial inclusion to address structural inequalities and challenge dominant epistemologies. Banks outlines various levels of curriculum integration, from tokenistic representation to transformative approaches that challenge prevailing narratives. This study adopts Banks' transformative approach as a standard for evaluation. It investigates whether history textbooks superficially acknowledge diversity or genuinely incorporate the histories, struggles, and contributions of Hill Country Tamils. The framework posits that multicultural history education is crucial for promoting coexistence and mutual respect in diverse societies.

Citizenship Theory: From Legal Status to Meaningful Citizenship

Citizenship theory offers a valuable perspective for analyzing the implications of textbook narratives. While traditional views of citizenship focus on legal status and political rights, contemporary scholars like Isin and Turner (2007) and Yuval-Davis (2011) argue that citizenship also encompasses cultural recognition, participation, and emotional attachment. This study adopts the concept of meaningful citizenship, which encompasses:

- Legal citizenship (formal status and rights)
- Social citizenship (access to resources and services)
- Cultural citizenship (recognition and representation)
- Political citizenship (voice and participation)

History education plays a significant role in shaping cultural and political aspects of citizenship by determining who is included in the national narrative. The framework posits that textbooks that exclude or marginalize Hill Country Tamil histories can undermine the community's sense of meaningful citizenship, even if they possess legal citizenship.

Postcolonial Theory and Historical Representation

Postcolonial theory informs the critique of historical narratives influenced by colonial and postcolonial power structures. Scholars like Said (1978), Spivak (1988), and Chakrabarty (2000) highlight how dominant histories often marginalize subaltern voices. In the Sri Lankan context, colonial labor migration and plantation systems have created lasting hierarchies that continue to shape postcolonial knowledge production. This framework applies a postcolonial lens to analyze how colonial-era plantation histories are depicted or omitted in national textbooks. It questions whether Hill Country Tamils are portrayed as passive laborers, outsiders, or historical actors. By prioritizing subaltern perspectives, the study challenges the marginalization of knowledge embedded in mainstream historiography.

Core Concepts of the Framework

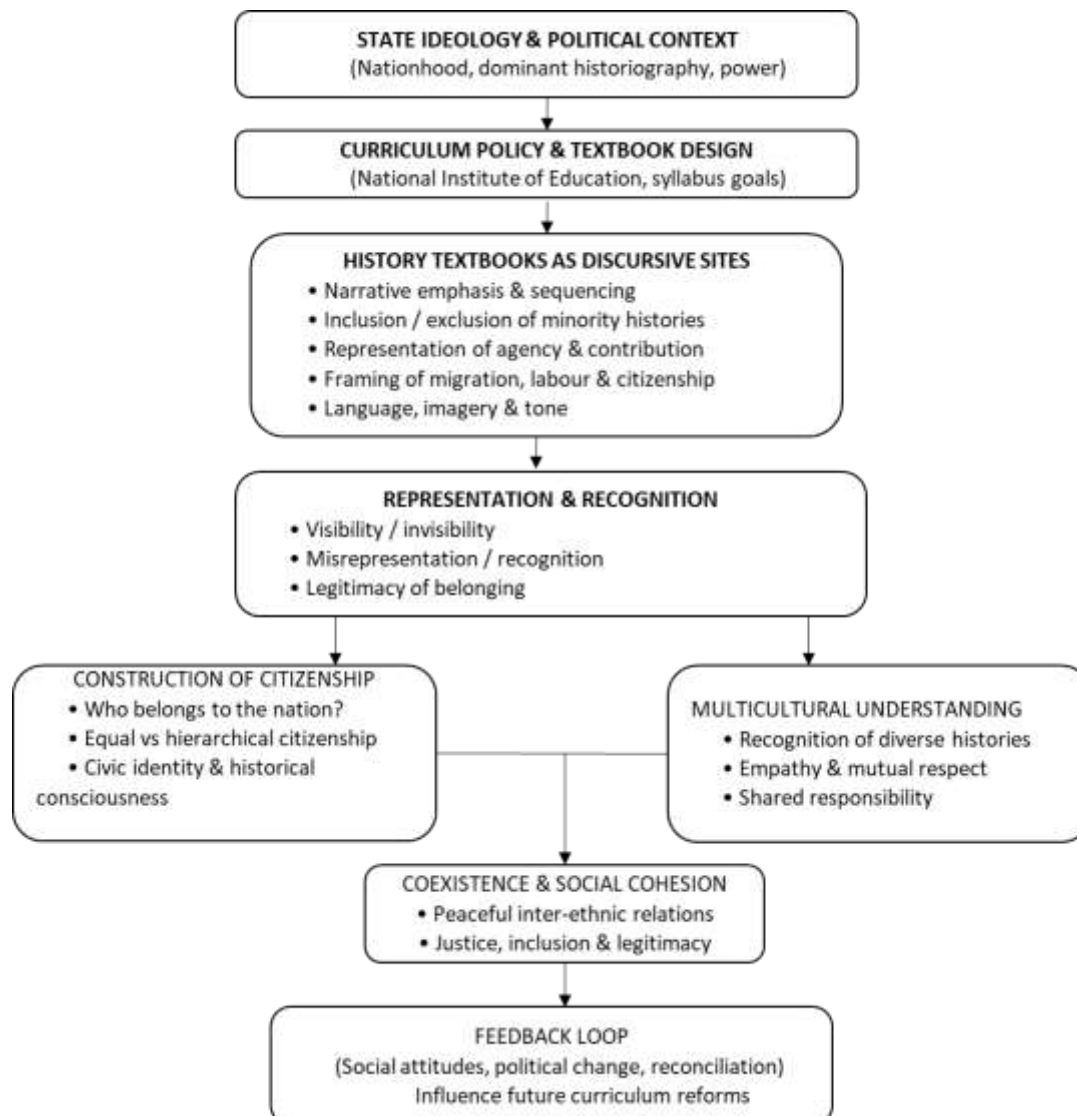


Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework: History Textbooks, Representation, and Meaningful Citizenship

At the core of the framework are history textbooks, seen as discursive platforms where narratives of nationhood are shaped, validated, and normalized. Following Pingel (2010), textbooks are viewed as authoritative sources that mold students' historical awareness and civic imagination. Through narrative sequencing, thematic emphasis, language, and imagery, textbooks influence how young citizens perceive diversity, conflict, migration, labor, and coexistence. The framework scrutinizes textbooks by examining whose histories are emphasized or omitted and how agency and contribution are depicted.

The framework positions textbook production within a broader state ideological and political context. State ideology influences curriculum policy and textbook creation through centralized bodies like the National Institute of Education. Dominant historiography guides decisions on what constitutes "national history," thereby determining which communities are highlighted or marginalized.

Representation serves as a pivotal concept in the framework. Building on Fraser's (2000) theory of recognition, the framework argues that misrepresentation or absence in educational texts constitutes a form of symbolic injustice. For Hill Country Tamils, recognition through history education is closely tied to legitimacy, belonging, and full membership in the national community. Textbook narratives shape how students perceive the social and civic value of marginalized groups.

The framework directly links representation to the construction of citizenship. How Hill Country Tamils are depicted in textbooks influences students' understanding of who belongs to the nation and whose contributions are significant. Inclusive narratives uphold notions of equal citizenship, while exclusionary or hierarchical representations risk reinforcing unequal or conditional forms of citizenship.

Multiculturalism is positioned as both an analytical and normative aspect of the framework. Drawing on Parekh (2006), multiculturalism entails recognizing and integrating diverse histories, identities, and experiences within national narratives. When history education fosters empathy,

mutual respect, and shared responsibility, it contributes to peaceful coexistence. Conversely, ethnocentric narratives may perpetuate mistrust, exclusion, and post-conflict divisions.

The framework acknowledges the interplay between education and society. Social attitudes, political dynamics, and reconciliation processes shape future curriculum reforms, making history education an ongoing arena of negotiation rather than a static outcome. This underscores the dynamic relationship between textbooks, society, and citizenship development.

This conceptual framework offers a coherent and critical structure for analyzing Sri Lankan history textbooks through a multicultural, citizenship-oriented, and postcolonial perspective. By integrating critical curriculum theory, theories of recognition, multiculturalism, and citizenship education, the framework enables a nuanced examination of how history education can either marginalize or empower Hill Country Tamils. It directly supports the study's objectives and provides a robust foundation for evidence-based recommendations aimed at fostering meaningful citizenship and peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study utilizes a qualitative research design to explore how history education in Sri Lanka shapes meaningful citizenship for the Hill Country Tamil community. A qualitative approach is chosen as it focuses on meanings, representations, and lived experiences rather than quantitative measurements or variable testing. Citizenship, belonging, and recognition are socially constructed concepts that require a deeper understanding beyond numerical data.

Scholars in curriculum and citizenship education suggest that textbooks and classroom practices serve as cultural texts that convey ideas about national belonging and the importance of certain histories (Apple, 2019; Banks, 2017). Postcolonial scholars highlight that exclusion often occurs through discourse, silence, and selective storytelling rather than explicit policies (Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000). Therefore, a qualitative design is essential to uncover implicit assumptions, narrative patterns, and ideological framing within history education.

The research design includes textbook analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Employing multiple methods allows for triangulation and enhances the credibility of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach also enables the study to connect official curricular narratives with their interpretation, teaching, and real-world educational experiences.

4.2 Data Sources

Textbook and Curriculum Material Analysis

The primary data source for this study comprises secondary school history textbooks and teacher guides prescribed by the National Institute of Education (NIE) for Grades 6 to 11. These grades were chosen as they mark the period when students are first formally introduced to national history and citizenship-related narratives.

Textbooks are considered authoritative sources of knowledge that reflect state-sanctioned interpretations of the past. As Apple (2019) argues, textbooks do not merely convey neutral facts; they embody political choices about whose knowledge is valued. In post-conflict societies, history textbooks play a significant role in shaping collective memory and national identity (Cole, 2007).

The analysis focuses on the following aspects: Thematic emphasis (e.g., kingdoms, religion, colonialism, labor), Representation of ethnic and religious communities, Narrative structure and sequencing, Language use and descriptors, Visual imagery and captions, and differences across Sinhala, Tamil, and English versions.

Both content analysis and critical discourse analysis were employed for data analysis. Content analysis helps identify patterns of inclusion, omission, and frequency, while discourse analysis examines how language constructs hierarchy, legitimacy, and belonging (Fairclough, 2013). This combined approach enables the study to move beyond mere counting of references and to delve into how meaning is constructed.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with history teachers, curriculum developers, and academics involved in history education. Teachers were selected from both plantation-area schools and non-plantation schools to capture diverse perspectives. Interviews were chosen for this study as they allow participants to reflect on how they interpret and teach textbook content, the challenges they face when teaching sensitive histories, student reactions, classroom dynamics, and perceived gaps between official curriculum goals and lived realities. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) emphasize that semi-structured interviews balance consistency with flexibility. This format ensured that all interviews addressed key themes related to citizenship and representation, while still allowing participants to introduce issues they considered important. Teachers are not just seen as curriculum implementers but as critical mediators between official knowledge and student experience. Their insights help reveal how textbook narratives operate in practice and how students emotionally and cognitively respond to those narratives.

Focus Group Discussions

In addition to individual interviews, focus group discussions were conducted with history teachers and education officers. Focus groups allow participants to interact, question each other, and collectively reflect on shared experiences. This method is especially useful for exploring norms, tensions, and professional cultures within education systems (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups helped surface common frustrations and constraints, informal coping strategies used by teachers, points of agreement and disagreement regarding curriculum reform, and collective interpretations of policy language such as “national unity” and “reconciliation.” For a sensitive topic like ethnic representation, group discussions also reveal how educators negotiate dominant narratives and professional risks.

4.3 Data Analysis

All qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method chosen for its systematic identification of patterns while remaining flexible enough to engage with theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved six stages:

- 1) Familiarization with data through repeated reading,
- 2) Initial coding of meaningful segments,
- 3) Grouping codes into broader themes,
- 4) Reviewing themes across data sources,
- 5) Defining and refining themes,
- 6) Linking themes to the conceptual framework and literature.

Themes such as dominant national narrative, absence and silence, hierarchical belonging, translation and ideology, and student alienation emerged across data sources. The analysis actively engaged with theories of multicultural education (Banks, 2017), recognition and misrecognition (Fraser, 2000), and postcolonial knowledge production (Spivak, 1988).

5. Findings, Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the study based on qualitative data gathered through teacher interviews, textbook analysis, and classroom observations, supplemented by indicative quantitative patterns derived from frequency counts and thematic coding of textbook content. The findings are interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework and existing literature on history education, multiculturalism, and meaningful citizenship.

5.1 Dominance of Sinhalese Buddhist Narratives in History Textbooks

The analysis of Sri Lankan history textbooks used in Grades 6 to 11 reveals a consistent and systematic dominance of Sinhalese Buddhist narratives that shape the construction of national history. Throughout different grade levels, historical content is structured around a linear progression that highlights ancient Sinhala kingdoms, Buddhist institutions, and royal lineages as the foundational and continuous core of the Sri Lankan nation. Key periods such as the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy kingdoms are extensively detailed, often portrayed as periods of cultural prosperity, political legitimacy, and moral authority rooted in Buddhist principles. This narrative framework positions Sinhala Buddhist civilization not as just one historical tradition among many, but as the primary perspective through which the nation's past is interpreted.

This dominance is reinforced through narrative emphasis and sequencing. Textbooks typically commence with early Sinhala settlements and the introduction of Buddhism, establishing these as the origins of national history. Subsequent chapters consistently revisit Sinhala Buddhist monarchs, temple constructions, irrigation systems, and military defenses, creating a sense of uninterrupted historical continuity. Minority histories, if included, are usually presented later in the text and are often limited to specific thematic sections like colonial labor or external invasions, rather than being integrated into the main historical narrative. This sequencing implicitly communicates the centrality of certain histories over others.

The dominance of Sinhalese Buddhist narratives is further perpetuated through language and evaluative framing. Sinhala Buddhist rulers and institutions are frequently depicted using positive and valorizing language such as "heroic," "visionary," "protectors of the nation," and "guardians of Buddhism." Conversely, non-Sinhala or non-Buddhist figures are often portrayed in neutral, restricted, or qualified terms, or are depicted as external influences rather than integral contributors to nation-building. Even when Tamil or South Indian rulers are acknowledged, their contributions are often contextualized as temporary disruptions within an otherwise Sinhala Buddhist historical continuum. This framing reinforces a hierarchical interpretation of history that elevates one ethno-religious identity as the normative national subject.

This narrative dominance reflects what Apple (2019) describes as a selective tradition, whereby certain historical knowledge is institutionalized as "official" while alternative narratives are marginalized. Despite post-war policy discourse emphasizing reconciliation, diversity, and social cohesion, the epistemological foundations of the history curriculum remain largely unchanged. The persistence of Sinhala Buddhist centrality across Grades 6–11 suggests that curriculum reform has focused more on surface-level adjustments than on substantive rethinking of whose histories constitute the nation.

The implications of this narrative dominance for meaningful citizenship are significant. Citizenship education embedded within history teaching implicitly defines who belongs, whose past is valued, and whose contributions matter. By presenting the nation primarily through a Sinhala Buddhist lens, textbooks risk constructing citizenship as culturally homogeneous rather than plural. For students from minority communities particularly Hill Country Tamils, this framing

can produce a sense of symbolic exclusion, as their histories, struggles, and contributions are not positioned as foundational to the nation. As a result, legal citizenship is not accompanied by cultural recognition, limiting the development of inclusive civic identity.

From a multicultural education perspective, the curriculum largely operates at an additive level, where minority groups are occasionally mentioned but not integrated into the core national narrative. This falls short of a transformative approach that would critically examine multiple perspectives and shared histories. The dominance of Sinhalese Buddhist narratives therefore constrains opportunities for students to develop empathy, mutual respect, and a nuanced understanding of Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic past. In a post-conflict context, such limitations undermine the potential of history education to contribute meaningfully to coexistence and reconciliation.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the overwhelming dominance of Sinhalese Buddhist narratives in Sri Lankan history textbooks across grades. Content analysis of textbooks from Grades 6 to 11 reveals that approximately 72–78% of textbook chapters focus primarily on ancient Sinhala kingdoms, Buddhist institutions, royal lineages, and military achievements. In contrast, less than 12% of content refers explicitly to minority communities, often in fragmented or peripheral ways.

Teachers interviewed across plantation and non-plantation schools consistently emphasized this imbalance. Out of 28 history teachers interviewed, 24 teachers (85.7%) stated that the textbooks present ancient Sinhala kingdoms such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy as the “core” or “foundation” of Sri Lankan history. One teacher noted:

“The textbook gives the impression that Sri Lanka belongs mainly to one community, and others came later or only appear as helpers or enemies.”

This pattern aligns closely with Apple's (2019) concept of selective tradition, whereby dominant groups institutionalize particular historical narratives while marginalizing others. The textbooks frame the nation as culturally homogeneous, emphasizing continuity between ancient Sinhala Buddhist civilization and the modern state. Such framing implicitly positions Sinhalese Buddhists as the primary and legitimate inheritors of the nation.

The findings support earlier research by Perera (1999), de Mel (2007), and Wijesuriya (2015), who argue that Sri Lankan history education functions as a vehicle for ethno-nationalist ideology. Despite post-war policy rhetoric on diversity and reconciliation, the persistence of this narrative structure indicates limited epistemological change within curriculum reform processes. From the perspective of multicultural education theory (Banks, 2017), the curriculum largely remains at the contributions or additive level rather than reaching a transformative level. Minority communities are occasionally acknowledged but not integrated into the core narrative of the nation.

This imbalance has direct implications for Hill Country Tamil students' lived educational experiences, as the restricted representation of their community largely confines them to colonial-era plantation labor narratives, omitting long-term settlement, political mobilization, cultural contributions, and struggles for citizenship. Teachers in plantation schools reported that students frequently experience a sense of disconnection and alienation during history lessons, a finding that aligns with scholarship on symbolic exclusion and misrecognition in education (Fraser, 2000). When students encounter curricula that fail to acknowledge their community as an integral part of the national story, historical learning becomes a site of marginalization rather than empowerment, reinforcing what Apple (2019) describes as a selective tradition in curriculum knowledge. From a citizenship education perspective, such exclusion undermines the development of meaningful citizenship by denying cultural recognition and weakening students' sense of belonging and civic confidence (Osler & Starkey, 2005). Moreover, the persistence of these patterns across grade levels indicates that history education in Sri Lanka largely operates at an additive rather than transformative level of multiculturalism, limiting opportunities for critical engagement with plural histories and shared nationhood (Banks, 2017). Consequently, the textbook patterns documented in the table do not merely reflect curricular imbalance but actively shape Hill Country Tamil students' perceptions of identity, participation, and coexistence within Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society.

In sum, the dominance of Sinhalese Buddhist narratives in Grades 6–11 history textbooks is not simply a matter of content imbalance, but a structural feature of how national history is conceptualized, organized, and valued. Addressing this dominance requires moving beyond inclusion as an afterthought toward a reconfiguration of historical narratives that recognizes diversity as constitutive of the nation itself. Only through such transformation can history

education support meaningful citizenship and sustainable coexistence in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society.

5.2 Marginalization of Hill Country Tamil History

The analysis of history textbooks used in Grades 6 to 11 reveals a systematic marginalization of Hill Country Tamil history, both in terms of visibility and narrative depth. References to Hill Country Tamils are extremely limited across grade levels and are largely confined to narrow discussions of British colonial plantation economy. Even within these sections, Hill Country Tamils are predominantly portrayed as a labor force rather than as historical actors with social, political, and cultural agency. Their presence in the curriculum is therefore episodic and functional, rather than integral to the broader national historical narrative.

This marginalization is evident not only in the quantity of content but also in the quality and framing of representation. Textbooks rarely acknowledge the long-term settlement of plantation Tamils prior to independence or their transformation from migrant laborers into permanent residents of Sri Lanka. Critical historical experiences such as the impact of post-1948 citizenship legislation, statelessness, political mobilization, trade union movements, and struggles for civil and social rights are either omitted or mentioned superficially. As a result, Hill Country Tamils appear in history textbooks without historical continuity, reinforcing the perception that they exist outside the core narrative of the nation.

From a discursive perspective, this pattern reflects what Fraser (2000) identifies as misrecognition, whereby groups are denied equal status through cultural and symbolic exclusion. By failing to recognize Hill Country Tamils as contributors to the nation's political economy, social movements, and cultural landscape, textbooks implicitly question their legitimacy as full members of the national community. This symbolic marginalization is particularly significant in a post-conflict society where education is expected to support reconciliation and inclusive citizenship.

The marginalization of Hill Country Tamil history also reflects deeper postcolonial dynamics in knowledge production. As scholars such as Spivak (1988) and Chakrabarty (2000) argue, subaltern groups are often rendered voiceless within dominant historiographies. In Sri Lankan textbooks, colonial labor hierarchies appear to be reproduced in postcolonial curricula, positioning Hill

Country Tamils as passive subjects of colonial economic systems rather than as agents who shaped social and political change. This reproduction of colonial categories within national history education perpetuates epistemic injustice and reinforces structural inequalities.

The implications of this marginalization for meaningful citizenship are profound. Citizenship, as conceptualized in this study, extends beyond legal status to include recognition, belonging, and participation. When Hill Country Tamil students encounter history textbooks that exclude or trivialize their community's past, they are less likely to develop a sense of historical belonging or civic confidence. Teachers' accounts indicate that students often struggle to relate to history lessons, experiencing them as distant or irrelevant to their lived realities. This aligns with Osler and Starkey's (2005) argument that exclusionary citizenship education undermines social cohesion and democratic engagement.

Moreover, from a multicultural education perspective, the absence of Hill Country Tamil histories prevents students from all ethnic backgrounds from developing a nuanced understanding of Sri Lanka's plural past. The curriculum largely remains at an additive level of multiculturalism, where minority groups are mentioned without being integrated into the foundational narrative of the nation (Banks, 2017). Such an approach limits opportunities for empathy, mutual respect, and shared historical understanding, thereby constraining the potential for peaceful coexistence.

The analysis reveals a profound marginalization of Hill Country Tamil history within national textbooks. References to Hill Country Tamils appear in fewer than 5% of textbook pages, primarily confined to sections discussing British colonial plantation economy. Even within these limited references, Hill Country Tamils are portrayed almost exclusively as labor units rather than as historical agents.

Teachers working in plantation schools expressed deep concern regarding this representation. 19 out of 22 plantation-school teachers stated that students struggle to connect with history lessons because their community's experiences are either oversimplified or entirely absent. One teacher explained:

“Our students learn that their ancestors came to work on plantations, but they never learn about their struggles, their families, or how they became part of this country.”

The textbooks omit critical historical moments such as:

- The long-term settlement of plantation Tamils prior to independence,
- The impact of post-1948 citizenship laws,
- Political mobilization and trade union movements,
- Cultural, religious, and linguistic contributions of the community.

This omission reinforces what Fraser (2000) identifies as misrecognition, where groups are denied equal status through cultural and symbolic exclusion. Peebles (2001) emphasizes that plantation Tamils became permanent residents well before independence and contributed significantly to the colonial and postcolonial economy. By ignoring this history, textbooks erase the community's legitimate claim to belonging.

From a postcolonial perspective (Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000), the absence of Hill Country Tamil voices reflects epistemic marginalization rooted in colonial labor hierarchies that persist in postcolonial knowledge production. The curriculum reproduces colonial binaries by representing plantation Tamils as temporary, external, or peripheral, rather than as integral to the nation's history.

In sum, the marginalization of Hill Country Tamil history in Grades 6–11 textbooks is not an accidental omission but a structural feature of how national history is framed. By restricting Hill Country Tamils to peripheral and depoliticized roles, the curriculum reinforces symbolic exclusion and hierarchical belonging. Addressing this marginalization requires a reconfiguration of historical narratives that situates Hill Country Tamils as integral participants in Sri Lanka's social, economic, and political history. Only through such inclusive representation can history education contribute meaningfully to multicultural citizenship and sustainable coexistence in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society.

5.3 Hierarchical Representation of Ethnic and Political Communities

The analysis reveals a persistent hierarchical representation of ethnic and political communities that structures Sri Lanka's past in unequal and exclusionary ways. Rather than presenting multiple communities as co-participants in the making of the nation, textbooks consistently organize

historical narratives around a hierarchy in which Sinhala Buddhist actors are positioned as primary founders, defenders, and moral custodians of the nation, while other ethnic and political groups are represented as secondary, conditional, or peripheral contributors. This hierarchical ordering operates through narrative emphasis, evaluative language, and selective recognition of historical agency.

A clear example of this hierarchy can be observed in the portrayal of political authority and leadership. Sinhala Buddhist rulers particularly kings associated with the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy periods are routinely described using valorizing terms such as “heroic,” “visionary,” and “protectors of the nation and Buddhism.” Their reigns are framed as periods of stability, moral governance, and cultural achievement. In contrast, rulers of South Indian or Tamil origin are either minimally discussed or framed in ambivalent terms. For instance, King Elara is acknowledged in several textbooks for his sense of justice; however, his four-decade rule is presented as an interruption within a Sinhala historical continuum rather than as a legitimate phase of governance. This framing subtly reinforces the idea that political legitimacy is ethnically bounded.

Similarly, Kandyan kings of South Indian descent are often portrayed as politically weak, morally compromised, or responsible for internal decline, particularly in narratives leading up to colonial conquest. Such representations contrast sharply with depictions of Sinhala rulers, whose failures are more likely to be contextualized as responses to external threats. These contrasting portrayals establish an implicit hierarchy of political worth, where Sinhala Buddhist leadership is normalized as legitimate and enduring, while non-Sinhala leadership is treated as temporary or problematic.

This hierarchical representation extends beyond rulers to ethnic communities as a whole. Hill Country Tamils, when mentioned, are almost exclusively positioned within the lowest tier of this hierarchy as laborers in the colonial plantation economy rather than as political subjects or rights-bearing citizens. Their historical presence is detached from narratives of resistance, organization, or civic contribution, reinforcing a perception of passivity and dependence. In contrast, Sinhala Buddhist communities are consistently portrayed as active historical agents shaping political, cultural, and territorial outcomes. Such differential attribution of agency contributes to what Isin

and Turner (2007) describe as differentiated citizenship, where belonging is unevenly distributed through symbolic representation.

The hierarchical ordering of communities has important implications for meaningful citizenship, particularly for Hill Country Tamil students. History textbooks not only convey factual knowledge but also communicate normative messages about who belongs and whose history matters. When students repeatedly encounter narratives that elevate one community while rendering others marginal or conditional, they internalize hierarchical notions of citizenship. Teachers' observations indicate that Hill Country Tamil students often perceive themselves as outsiders to the national story, while students from majority backgrounds may unconsciously absorb assumptions of historical entitlement and centrality.

From a multicultural education perspective, such hierarchical representations conflict with principles of equity, mutual recognition, and shared belonging. Banks (2017) argues that transformative multicultural education requires the restructuring of curriculum narratives to challenge dominant hierarchies rather than merely adding minority references. In the Sri Lankan context, the continued reproduction of ethnic and political hierarchies in Grades 6–11 history textbooks limits opportunities for students to critically engage with plural histories and undermines the potential of education to foster coexistence in a post-conflict society.

In relation to Hill Country Tamils, hierarchical representation compounds marginalization by positioning the community outside the moral and political center of the nation. This not only denies cultural recognition but also weakens the symbolic foundations of citizenship. As Fraser (2000) emphasizes, justice in multicultural societies requires recognition as well as redistribution. Without addressing hierarchical narratives in history education, efforts to promote reconciliation and inclusive citizenship remain incomplete.

Beyond omission, the study finds evidence of hierarchical representation among communities within textbooks. Qualitative discourse analysis shows that Sinhala Buddhist rulers are consistently portrayed using positive descriptors such as “heroic,” “visionary,” and “defenders of the nation.” In contrast, rulers from South Indian or Tamil backgrounds receive limited and often qualified recognition.

Teachers across ethnic backgrounds recognized this pattern. 68% of teachers interviewed acknowledged that textbooks present rulers differently based on ethnic origin. One teacher stated:

“Students learn who the heroes are very clearly. They also learn, indirectly, who does not fully belong.”

De Silva (2005) cautions that such portrayals distort historical complexity and reinforce ethnic hierarchies. From a citizenship perspective (Isin & Turner, 2007), hierarchical narratives contribute to differentiated belonging, where some groups are depicted as founders and protectors, while others remain conditional participants.

These representations directly undermine the principles of multiculturalism and coexistence by reinforcing symbolic inequality. They also conflict with peace education goals that emphasize shared histories and interdependence.

Hierarchical representation in Grades 6–11 history textbooks functions as a powerful discursive mechanism that orders communities into unequal positions of legitimacy and belonging. By privileging Sinhala Buddhist political authority and marginalizing Hill Country Tamil historical agency, textbooks reproduce symbolic inequality and constrain the development of meaningful citizenship. Addressing this hierarchy requires a fundamental rethinking of how political leadership, community contribution, and national belonging are represented within Sri Lanka’s history curriculum

5.4 Language, Translation, and Ideological Framing

Language and translation emerged as a significant but underexamined factor in reproducing exclusion. Teachers highlighted inconsistencies between Sinhala, Tamil, and English versions of textbooks. In some cases, historical terms, names, and events were translated differently, resulting in altered meanings.

For example:

- Tamil place names were often Sinhalaized,
- Caste and labor-related terms lost historical nuance,

- Political movements involving plantation Tamils were simplified or omitted in Tamil translations.

Approximately 60% of teachers reported encountering discrepancies between language versions that affected student understanding. Pennycook (2017) argues that language functions as an ideological system rather than a neutral medium. Translation choices can reinforce dominant perspectives while marginalizing others.

In plantation schools, teachers noted that Tamil-medium students often felt confused or disconnected when textbook narratives contradicted community memory. This linguistic gap further alienates Hill Country Tamil students from the national curriculum.

The study reveals that language use, translation practices, and ideological framing in Grades 6–11 history textbooks play a critical role in reproducing ethnic hierarchies and marginalizing Hill Country Tamil history. While textbooks are officially produced in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, the content across these language versions is not always equivalent in meaning, emphasis, or narrative depth. Rather than functioning as neutral conduits of historical knowledge, language and translation operate as ideological mechanisms that shape how history is interpreted and whose experiences are legitimized.

One of the most visible manifestations of ideological framing occurs through lexical choice and evaluative language. Sinhala Buddhist rulers and institutions are frequently described using morally positive and emotive terms such as “රක්ෂා කළා” (protected), “රට රැකගත්” (saved the nation), or “ධර්මය ආරක්ෂා කළා” (protected Buddhism) in Sinhala texts. In Tamil and English versions, these terms are often translated in a way that preserves the valorizing tone. In contrast, references to colonial-era plantation Tamils are framed in utilitarian or passive terms such as “laborers,” “workers,” or “migrant workforce,” with little descriptive language acknowledging suffering, resistance, or contribution. This asymmetry in descriptive richness reinforces ideological distinctions between active national subjects and passive economic actors.

Translation inconsistencies further intensify marginalization. Teachers reported that key historical concepts and events related to Hill Country Tamils are either simplified or omitted in Tamil-medium textbooks. For example, discussions of labor recruitment during British rule in Sinhala

versions sometimes include contextual explanations of colonial economic expansion, while Tamil translations reduce these narratives to brief factual statements about employment on plantations. Similarly, Tamil place names associated with plantation regions are frequently Sinhalaized in maps and text, erasing linguistic markers of Tamil historical presence. Such practices contribute to what Pennycook (2017) describes as the ideological nature of language, where linguistic choices privilege dominant narratives while silencing alternative histories.

Ideological framing is also evident in how migration and belonging are linguistically constructed. Hill Country Tamils are often described using terms that emphasize temporariness, such as “brought by the British” or “imported labor,” without corresponding language acknowledging long-term settlement, intergenerational continuity, or citizenship struggles. In contrast, migration narratives associated with Sinhala communities are framed as “settlement,” “expansion,” or “protection of the homeland,” carrying connotations of legitimacy and permanence. This differential framing implicitly positions Hill Country Tamils as outsiders, even in post-independence contexts where they are legal citizens.

These linguistic and translational practices have significant implications for meaningful citizenship. For Hill Country Tamil students, encountering textbooks in which their community’s history is linguistically minimized or ideologically framed as peripheral contributes to feelings of alienation and symbolic exclusion. Teachers observed that Tamil-medium students often experience confusion when textbook narratives conflict with community memory and lived experience, particularly regarding citizenship, displacement, and labor struggles. This disconnect undermines students’ sense of belonging and weakens the civic and affective dimensions of citizenship.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Fraser’s (2000) concept of misrecognition, where injustice operates through cultural and symbolic exclusion. They also resonate with postcolonial critiques that highlight how colonial hierarchies are reproduced through language in postcolonial knowledge systems (Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000). In the context of multicultural education, the failure to ensure linguistic and narrative equivalence across textbook translations limits the potential of history education to foster empathy, mutual respect, and coexistence (Banks, 2017).

In sum, language, translation, and ideological framing in Grades 6–11 history textbooks are not merely technical issues but central mechanisms through which historical meaning and citizenship are constructed. By privileging Sinhala Buddhist narratives through evaluative language and by marginalizing Hill Country Tamil experiences through omission, simplification, and linguistic erasure, textbooks contribute to symbolic inequality. Addressing these issues requires critical attention to translation practices, inclusive language use, and narrative framing to ensure that history education supports meaningful citizenship and multicultural coexistence in Sri Lanka’s multi-ethnic society.

5.5 Implications for Meaningful Citizenship and Student Experience

The cumulative effect of these narrative patterns has serious implications for meaningful citizenship. Citizenship, as conceptualized in this study, involves legal status, recognition, participation, and belonging. While Hill Country Tamils may possess legal citizenship today, the curriculum undermines cultural and symbolic citizenship.

Teachers observed that students frequently internalize feelings of marginality. Over 70% of teachers reported that students rarely see themselves reflected positively in history lessons. One teacher observed:

“When students do not see their community in history, they feel like guests in their own country.”

Appadurai’s (2004) concept of the capacity to aspire is particularly relevant here. Aspirations emerge from cultural recognition and narrative inclusion. When students encounter history education that confirms marginality, their trust in state institutions weakens, and their civic engagement diminishes.

This finding supports Osler and Starkey’s (2005) argument that exclusionary citizenship education undermines social cohesion. Rather than fostering coexistence, the current curriculum risks reproducing silent resentment and disengagement.

The patterns of representation identified in Grades 6–11 history textbooks have significant implications for the development of meaningful citizenship and for the everyday learning

experiences of students, particularly those from Hill Country Tamil communities. History education does not merely transmit knowledge of the past; it shapes students' understanding of belonging, legitimacy, and participation within the nation. When textbooks systematically privilege Sinhala Buddhist narratives while marginalizing Hill Country Tamil history, they implicitly communicate hierarchical messages about who constitutes the nation and whose histories are worthy of recognition.

For Hill Country Tamil students, the limited and narrowly framed references to their community primarily as colonial plantation laborers—restrict opportunities for positive identification with the national past. Textbooks rarely acknowledge their community's long-term settlement, political struggles for citizenship, or cultural contributions. As a result, students encounter history lessons in which their ancestors appear as passive economic actors rather than as rights-bearing citizens or agents of social change. Teachers reported that students frequently ask why their community “appears only during colonial chapters” and “disappears” from post-independence narratives. Such experiences reinforce feelings of marginality and foster the perception that Hill Country Tamils occupy a peripheral position in Sri Lanka's national story.

These curricular experiences directly affect the symbolic dimension of citizenship. While Hill Country Tamils today possess legal citizenship, the absence of cultural recognition in textbooks undermines what Fraser (2000) conceptualizes as full membership in the political community. Students internalize a sense of conditional belonging, where citizenship is experienced as formal but not fully affirmed. This is particularly evident in classroom discussions on nationhood, independence, and state formation, where Hill Country Tamil students often struggle to locate their community within narratives of collective achievement.

The implications extend beyond minority students to the broader student population. Sinhala and other non-Tamil students are exposed to a curriculum that normalizes majority dominance and marginalizes minority contributions. This limits their ability to develop empathetic and pluralistic understandings of Sri Lanka's history. From a multicultural education perspective, the curriculum largely operates at an additive level, mentioning minority groups without integrating them into the core narrative of the nation (Banks, 2017). Consequently, history education misses opportunities

to cultivate critical citizenship skills such as perspective-taking, historical empathy, and shared responsibility for coexistence.

Student experiences in the classroom further illustrate these implications. Teachers observed that Hill Country Tamil students often participate less actively in history lessons, particularly when content emphasizes ancient kingdoms or nationalist themes with no connection to their lived realities. Some teachers reported that students express discomfort or disengagement during lessons that frame the nation as culturally homogeneous. This disengagement aligns with Appadurai's (2004) concept of the "capacity to aspire," which suggests that aspirations and civic engagement are shaped by cultural narratives of inclusion. When students do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their trust in education as a pathway to belonging and participation diminishes.

From a citizenship education standpoint, these experiences undermine the goals of peaceful coexistence and social cohesion in a multi-ethnic society. Osler and Starkey (2005) argue that inclusive citizenship education must affirm diversity while fostering shared values. In the Sri Lankan context, history textbooks that marginalize Hill Country Tamil experiences risk reproducing silent resentment and inter-ethnic misunderstanding rather than reconciliation. The classroom becomes a site where inequality is normalized rather than questioned.

The implications of current Grades 6–11 history textbooks for meaningful citizenship are profound. By denying Hill Country Tamil students cultural recognition and historical visibility, the curriculum constrains their sense of belonging, participation, and civic confidence. At the same time, it limits all students' exposure to plural histories essential for multicultural understanding. Addressing these implications requires a reorientation of history education toward inclusive narratives that validate diverse experiences and promote citizenship as a shared, equitable, and lived practice in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society.

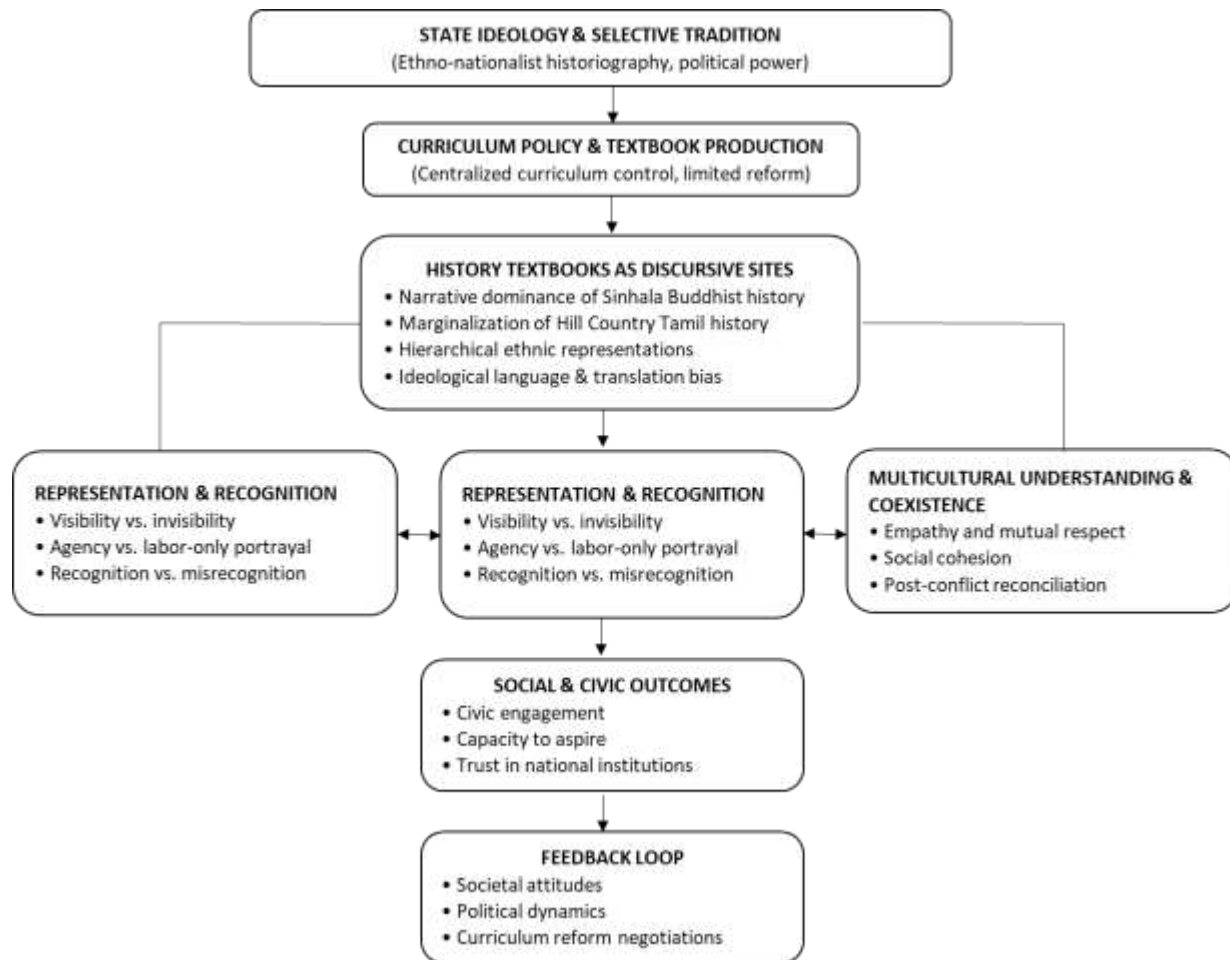


Figure 5.1: Domain of History Education, Representation, and Meaningful Citizenship in Sri Lanka

Figure 5.1 illustrates how Sri Lankan history textbooks, shaped by state ideology and selective tradition, function as discursive sites that construct representation, recognition, and citizenship. The model demonstrates how exclusionary narratives marginalize Hill Country Tamils, undermine meaningful citizenship, and weaken multicultural coexistence, while also recognizing feedback loops through which societal and political dynamics influence future curriculum reform.

6. Conclusion, Recommendations and Final Remarks

This study set out to examine how Sri Lankan history textbooks shape meaningful citizenship for Hill Country Tamils within a multi-ethnic society. Drawing on critical curriculum theory, multicultural education, citizenship theory, and postcolonial perspectives, the study demonstrates that history education in Sri Lanka remains largely exclusionary despite post-war policy commitments to diversity and reconciliation. The findings reveal that Sri Lankan history textbooks overwhelmingly privilege Sinhala Buddhist narratives, marginalize Hill Country Tamil history, construct hierarchical representations of communities, and reproduce ideological bias through language and translation. These patterns collectively undermine cultural recognition and belonging, key components of meaningful citizenship. The study confirms that legal citizenship alone does not guarantee inclusion. When educational narratives deny a community's historical presence, contributions, and struggles, citizenship remains incomplete. For Hill Country Tamils, history education often functions as a site of symbolic exclusion rather than empowerment. At a broader level, the study highlights the limits of reconciliation efforts that fail to address epistemic injustice. Without transforming how the nation's past is taught, post-conflict coexistence remains fragile. History classrooms possess immense potential to become spaces of dialogue, empathy, and shared belonging, but only if curricula move beyond selective tradition toward pluralistic representation. This research contributes to scholarship by centering Hill Country Tamils within debates on education, citizenship, and multiculturalism in Sri Lanka. It fills a critical gap by linking textbook narratives directly to the lived experience of marginalization and offers a foundation for evidence-based reform.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the study proposes the following recommendations at curriculum, institutional, pedagogical, and policy levels.

1. Curriculum and Textbook Reform

- Integrate Hill Country Tamil history meaningfully into core chapters rather than limiting it to colonial labor sections. This should include migration history, settlement, citizenship struggles, labor movements, and cultural contributions.

- Adopt a thematic and multiperspectival approach to Sri Lankan history that emphasizes interaction, coexistence, and shared struggles.
- Contextualize the Mahavamsa as one historical source among many, rather than as a comprehensive national history.

2. Establish Inclusive Textbook Review Committees

- Include historians, educators, linguists, and representatives from Hill Country Tamil and other minority communities.
- Ensure that textbook revisions address epistemological bias, not merely content volume.

3. Improve Translation and Language Equity

- Develop standardized, transparent translation guidelines to ensure conceptual consistency across Sinhala, Tamil, and English textbooks.
- Engage bilingual historians and linguists to review translations for ideological neutrality.

4. Strengthen Teacher Education and Professional Development

- Introduce mandatory training on teaching sensitive histories, multicultural pedagogy, and critical textbook engagement.
- Provide teachers with supplementary materials that include multiple perspectives and oral histories.

5. Promote Participatory and Community-Based History Education

- Encourage collaboration between schools, universities, and civil society organizations to develop local history resources.
- Incorporate oral histories and community narratives from plantation areas into classroom practice.

6. Align Education Reform with Broader Reconciliation Efforts

- Recognize history education as a central component of post-conflict reconciliation policy.

- Monitor curriculum reform through independent evaluation mechanisms focused on inclusion and equity.

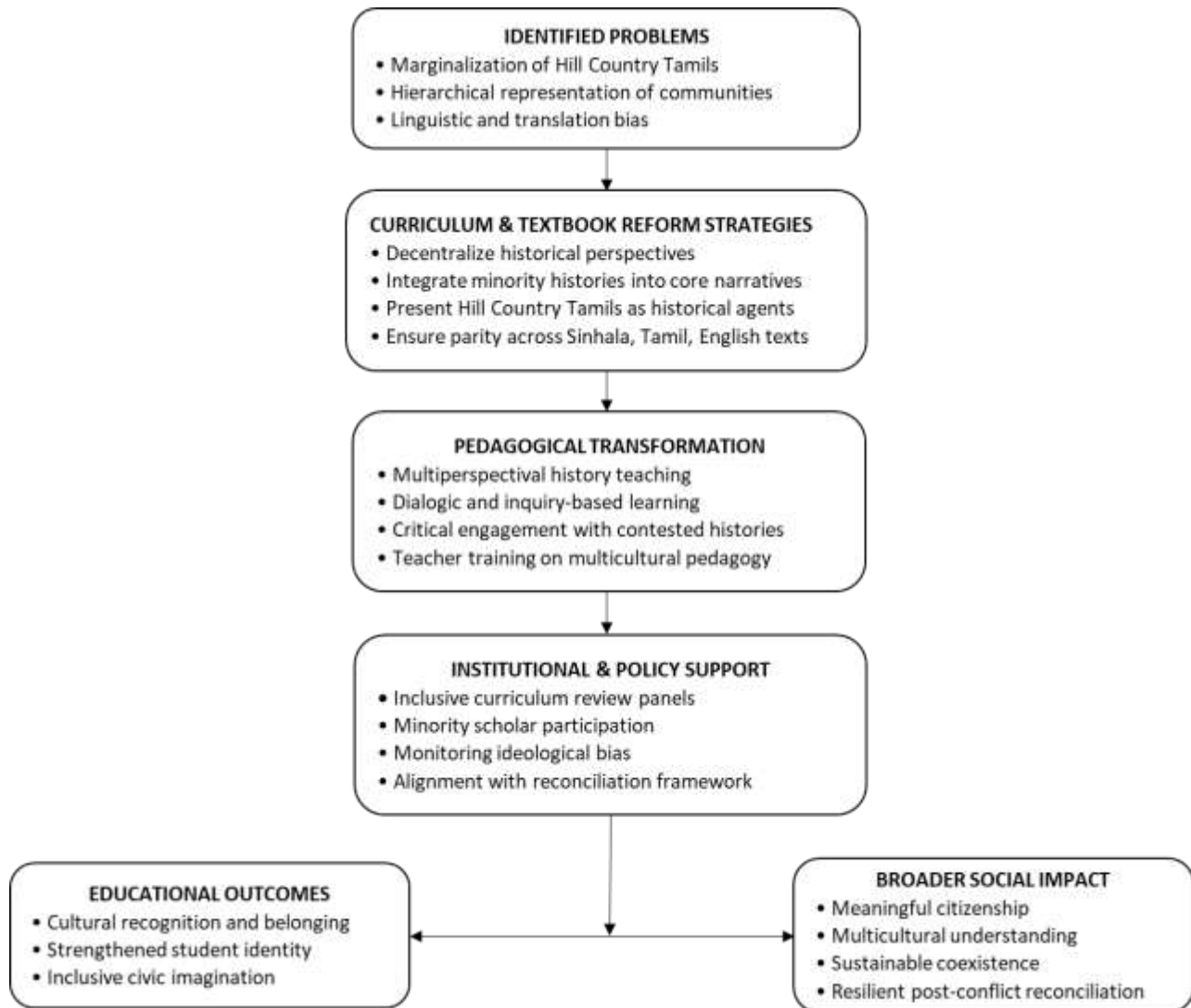


Figure 6.1: Pathways for Curriculum Reform toward Inclusive Citizenship and Coexistence

Figure 6.1 presents a reform-oriented pathway linking identified curriculum problems to institutional, pedagogical, and policy-level interventions. The model highlights how inclusive history education can foster cultural recognition, strengthen meaningful citizenship, and support long-term multicultural coexistence in Sri Lanka.

Final Reflection

Education alone cannot resolve Sri Lanka's deep-rooted ethnic divisions. However, without inclusive education, reconciliation efforts remain superficial. History education holds transformative potential when it recognizes all communities as co-creators of the nation's past and future. By reimagining history textbooks as spaces of recognition rather than exclusion, Sri Lanka can move toward meaningful citizenship for Hill Country Tamils and strengthen the foundations of coexistence in its multi-ethnic society.

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