

# First International Research Conference on the Prospects for Integrated Development of the North and East of Sri Lanka

இலங்கையின் வடக்கு மற்றும் கிழக்கின் ஒருங்கிணைந்த  
வளர்ச்சிக்கான வாய்ப்புகள் குறித்த முதல் சர்வதேச  
ஆராய்ச்சி மாநாடு

## Conference Theme

On the Prospects for Integrated Development of the North  
and East of Sri Lanka and the Role of Diaspora

மாநாட்டின் கருப்பொருள்  
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புலம்பெயர் மக்களின் பங்கு

This international conference aims to bring together academics, practitioners, and policymakers across the world from various disciplines such as economics, business, health, education, engineering, demography, culture and social and human sciences, to share their ideas, research findings and experience. The research papers to be presented at this conference are expected to delve into pressing issues faced daily by the people in the North and East.

Research findings shall be based on field data with a view to enumerate suggestions and policy directions and thereby to address those issues with the solitary goal of improving their living standards and help reduce their suffering. The conference will also serve as an ideal forum for likeminded scholars around the world to present and discuss their research, exchange research ideas and experiences, and develop a coordinate networking of research projects towards the development of the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka.

# **Signs of Fragmentation in Inter-Religious Relationships in the North and East of Sri Lanka: An Obstacle or a Catalyst to Socio-Cultural and Economic Advancements**

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South Asia has long been described as a paradox: a region endowed with abundant natural and human resources, yet one where poverty and underdevelopment persist, largely due to persistent divisions along ethnic and religious lines. This observation holds especially true for Sri Lanka, a nation where post-independence political and social life has been deeply marked by ethnic and religious conflict. While Sinhala - Buddhist chauvinism remains dominant at the national level, the North and East - home predominantly to Hindus, Muslims, and Christians - are increasingly destabilized by intra-minority religious fragmentation. This paper examines how such divisions function as a barrier to post-war recovery and evaluates whether they might, under certain conditions, be transformed into a catalyst for more inclusive socio-cultural and economic advancement.

## **Historical Context and Emerging Religious Fragmentation**

During the civil war (1983 - 2009), Tamil Hindus and Christians largely coexisted in solidarity, united in resisting Sinhala majoritarianism and the state's monopolization of power. In the aftermath of the war, however, new patterns of competition have emerged. Hindu revivalist groups such as *Siva Sena*, *Urudhra Sena*, etc., have sought to reassert Saivite dominance in the North, sometimes marginalizing other religious institutions in Jaffna and the Vanni. Simultaneously, Muslim identity politics in the East has intensified, with tensions escalating around mosque construction, land disputes, and ritual processions. The rise of Islamist militancy, tragically exemplified by the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, further deepened mistrust, casting Muslims as internal outsiders within Tamil-majority areas.

Concrete cases illustrate these dynamics. In 2013, clashes in Kattankudy (Batticaloa district) arose when Hindu temple committees resisted the expansion of mosques, leading to violence and political mediation that failed to resolve underlying resentment. In Trincomalee, similar disputes in 2017 over the construction of religious sites revealed how spatial competition mirrors broader struggles for identity and authority. In Jaffna, Christian schools and charity centres, once played a key role to regional development, report declining support, as Diaspora funds increasingly flow towards temple expansion rather than educational or economic projects. These patterns indicate that religious revivalism, which is taking the shape of religious fundamentalism, is not only symbolic but materially reshaping recovery trajectories.

## **Socio-Economic and Cultural Consequences**

The socio-economic costs of fragmentation are significant. Diaspora remittances, which could serve as vital capital for infrastructure, youth employment, and women's empowerment, are increasingly diverted towards sectarian projects such as erecting massive

religious sites with a competitive spirit. NGOs operating in Batticaloa note that inter-religious mistrust has disrupted joint livelihood schemes, particularly for Tamil and Muslim women, undermining cooperative models that had shown promise in post-war reconstruction. In the North, Christian health centers and schools struggle to maintain services as funding becomes unevenly distributed along religious lines.

Cultural life has also been unsettled. Shared festivals and rituals that once fostered inter-communal bonds are increasingly contested. Religious processions now carry undertones of territorial assertion, reinforcing boundaries rather than bridging them. The expansion of religious sites often functions less as a spiritual necessity and more as a visible claim to space and authority. As Asanga Welikala (2012) observes, Sri Lanka's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are consistently undermined by political projects of majoritarian or revivalist dominance. In the North and East, these dynamics risk replacing an ethnicized conflict with an equally destructive religious one.

### **Broader Implications**

The shift from ethnic to religiously inspired hostilities represents a dangerous reconfiguration of Sri Lanka's conflict landscape. Movements such as *Bodu Bala Sena* and *Ravana Balaya* in the South, and *Siva Sena* or Islamic revivalist groups in the North and East, reflect a national trend in which religious identity becomes both a political tool and a social fault line. For communities in the North and East, where war recovery remains incomplete, this has resulted in a fragile social fabric and stalled economic progress. The challenge lies not only in curbing violence but in addressing the deeper structural forces that drive exclusivism: uneven resource allocation, politicized religious institutions, and unregulated Diaspora funding.

### **Conclusion**

This study contends that inter-religious fragmentation in the North and East has become a formidable obstacle to sustainable post-war recovery. By diverting Diaspora resources towards sectarian ends, weakening traditions of pluralism, and obstructing joint development initiatives, these tensions undermine both social cohesion and economic rebuilding. Left unaddressed, they threaten to entrench a new cycle of religious conflict in place of the ethnic hostilities that devastated the country for more than three decades.

At the same time, this paper argues for a cautious optimism. If constructively engaged, religious competition might be reframed as an impetus for renewal, compelling communities to recognize the limitations of exclusivism and to forge new forms of solidarity. Through inclusive governance, sustained interfaith dialogue, and more purposeful Diaspora engagement, fragmentation could be transformed from an obstacle into a catalyst for participatory governance, socio-cultural resilience, and sustainable economic advancement. For the North and East, where the wounds of war remain fresh, the central task is not merely to manage division but to channel it into creative and pluralist forms of recovery.

**Keywords:** Inter-religious fragmentation; North and East Sri Lanka; Post-war recovery; Diaspora engagement; Religious pluralism

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