

Honors Project on Ethnolinguistic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka
Lillian Eckstein, Class of 2018

Through the support of the Peter J. Grua and Mary G. O’Connell Research Award, I conducted consequential, in-person, and independent primary research in Sri Lanka that provided data and qualitative evidence for my honors project titled “What Policies Cannot Express: An Examination of Sri Lanka’s Continuing Inability to Bridge the Sinhala-Tamil Ethnolinguistic Divide through National Policies and Programs.” Due to the nature of my honors project, the ability to travel to collect these data and interviews in-person was critical to my ability to execute meaningful analyses of the current political and sociocultural climate in the country post-conflict. Sri Lanka is a welcoming country to researchers but due to its hard-to-access location, history, and current nature of connection to the global world, my honors project would not have been properly supported nor as important of a contribution to the literature without the ability to conduct this research in December 2017 and January 2018.

Over the course of three weeks, I traveled to three different major cities in Sri Lanka—Colombo, Jaffna, and Kandy—and I spoke with politicians, public administrators, civil servants, academics, students, and civil society members. With the guidance of Professor Ericka Albaugh, professor of comparative politics and an expert in the field of the politics of language, I planned and executed extensive research and analyses of the data and interviews collected in-country.

I started my research in Colombo where I managed to secure interviews with various public administrators, former politicians, and academics. I spent time speaking with students at the University of Colombo and had the opportunity to ask civilians about their experiences with the ethnolinguistic divide and the history of conflict in the country. Two highlights from my time include a meeting at the house of retired Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda who is considered to be a leading scholar in political science in Sri Lanka and having the opportunity to observe a meeting between the leaders of the JVP (major opposition party, communist/Marxist-Leninist) and political advisors of the United National Party. I secured time in the archives of the University Grants Commission (UGC) to gather statistical data about the admissions numbers for the public universities dating back to the 1980s when the UGC was formed. The data from the UGC proved exceptionally critical to my analyses and composed a main part of my argument. These numbers undoubtedly would have been impossible to acquire without physical collection in-country.

In the second week, I was in the Northern Province where most of the war was fought and had quite interesting conversations with public administrators, politicians, and academics. I was even lucky enough to be invited to the High Security Zone in the Northernmost part of the island where I had the opportunity to meet with and interview the Major General of the Special Forces. It was quite informative to hear contrasting viewpoints of the situation in the country from all different types of people who lived and worked in Tamil-majority spaces. I had the opportunity to speak with students at the University of Jaffna and again observe just how different the culture of the North is from the rest of the country.

My final week was spent in Kandy, the central cultural capital of the country. During the day, I conducted a few more interviews, spoke with students at the University of Peradeniya, and spent many hours in the library at the International Center for Ethnic Studies. I worked to tie up the loose ends of the in-country research while happily spending time with the family that I lived with during my time studying abroad in Sri Lanka in the Fall of 2016.

One of the most exceptional things about the whole experience that was supported by the Grua/O’Connell Research Award is that it allowed me to learn an incredible amount from Sri Lankan experts—whether they were politicians, academics, or civil society members—and to benefit from the extensive sociocultural networks within the country. I was shown equal generosity from all parties and without the grant, I would not have been able to complete the most challenging and worthwhile research project of my time at Bowdoin.

Faculty Mentor: Ericka Albaugh

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