

'SINHALA-ONLY' POLICY REVISITED: PRE-INDEPENDENCE DISCOURSES ON OFFICIAL LANGUAGE¹

Sandagomi Coperahewa*

Abstract

In 1956, eight years after political independence, the Official Language Act No.33 of 1956 (popularly known as the 'Sinhala-only' Act) made Sinhala the sole official language of Sri Lanka, replacing the ex-colonial language, English. It has become a firmly established belief among political and social historians that Sri Lanka's language controversy emerged during the 1950s over the selection of an official language. Moving away from this dominant paradigm of post-independence language politics, this paper focuses on the pre-independence discourses on 'national language'/'official language' and shows how the idea of one official language first emerged in the colonial setting and continued to the post-colonial era. Utilizing previously unexamined sources, the analysis traces pre-independence discourses and ideological strands of "Sinhala-only" language policy and shows that the subsequent hegemonic demand for 'Sinhala-only' followed on from a colonial legacy. The central argument of this paper will help to revise understandings of the history of the country's debate on official languages.