



Mapping the Alternative History Education Landscape in Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

This report examines the current state of public school history education in Sri Lanka and maps the alternative history education landscape from 2019 onwards. The report intends to serve as a baseline study of the various non-state history education initiatives that have been developed as a response to the well-documented shortcomings of state history education. The findings will be used to develop a Strategic Plan for Itihas, a non-profit organisation established in 2022 to advance history education reform in Sri Lanka.

Following a brief outline of the methodology used for this research, the report is presented in four parts. First, a problem analysis is laid out with reference to the limitations of state history education in Sri Lanka.

Second, non-state alternative spaces and approaches to history education are discussed in terms of the two main types of audiences such approaches cater to: a generalist audience and a specialist audience. A generalist audience refers to youth and the general public interested in learning about Sri Lanka's history. A specialist audience refers to a diverse group of history professionals, including academics, researchers (including from history adjacent fields such as archaeology and art history), and history school teachers. Importantly, Itihas does not focus exclusively on school children. Instead, it focuses on an older category of youth, aged 16-35, as well as educators (such as history teachers and university lecturers) who directly or indirectly shape the process of history education of school children.

The third part of the report explores the challenges faced in developing and implementing alternative history education initiatives in terms of: (i) language and translation; (ii) *ad hoc* funding; (iii) resistance from state institutions; and (iv) political risks.

The final section of the report contains potential areas for future programming of Itihas based on the identification of gaps and challenges in the current non-state history education landscape. The space for future interventions is triangulated by considering such existing gaps and challenges, as well as the expertise of the core team at Itihas. The report concludes that, given its expertise in academia and research, Itihas can maximise its impact in this space by developing the skills of a 'specialist audience', such as academics, researchers, university lecturers and school teachers. This audience, in turn, can create a multiplier effect in terms of delivering history education to a 'generalist audience', i.e. the public, university students and school children.

2. Methodology

The report employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate alternative history education initiatives in Sri Lanka, focusing on insights gathered from key informant interviews (KIIs) and secondary research. The research attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the landscape by engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including civil society organisations, policymakers, academics, and individuals with prior involvement in public school education reform efforts.

1. Key Informant Interviews:

Seventeen interviews were conducted with key informants selected for their various expertise. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected informants to explore their insights, experiences, and perspectives on alternative history education initiatives in Sri Lanka. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed information about the challenges, successes, and recommendations associated with such initiatives. Interviews were conducted by the Lead Researcher, Shamara Wettimuny, and Research Associate, Anisha Dias Bandaranaike. Interviewees were told that the purpose of the baseline study was to inform the future strategic planning of Itihas.

2. Secondary Research:

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to understand the context of weaknesses in the state history education system, previous attempts at education reform over the past decade, and existing alternative history education initiatives in Sri Lanka. Two monographs in particular guided the thinking of this report: Mihiri Warnasuriya, *Building the 'Sri Lankan nation' through education: The identity politics of teaching history in a multicultural post-war society* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2018) and Natasha Karunaratne, *The Battleground of Sri Lankan History Education: Barriers to Teaching Inclusive Histories* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2021).

A limitation of this research is that it only focuses on large-scale initiatives that exist 'on the radar' of the history professionals interviewed for this report. It is likely that there are smaller-scale, localised initiatives that have not made it into the mainstream. These initiatives may take place in silos or in online/offline spaces that have not come to the attention of those consulted. Therefore, this report does not claim to be an exhaustive examination of non-state history education initiatives and instead focuses on select initiatives.

3. Problem Analysis of State-Led History Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's state-led history education system faces a deeply entrenched problem that impedes reform efforts. This analysis focuses on three interrelated aspects: substantive deficiencies, pedagogical issues, and limited accessibility to channels that could contest or change the content. These aspects collectively contribute to a systemic resistance to reform within the state sector.

Substantive deficiencies in the school history syllabus:

Since 2007, history has been a compulsory subject in state secondary schools and is considered a subject that has 'vast outreach'. Furthermore, it has the 'ability to influence perceptions of and attitudes towards diversity by disseminating information regarding the origins, histories and imageries of the different ethnic and religious groups that make up the Sri Lankan nation.'¹ Thus, according to Warnasuriya, history education is commonly used for 'instilling common values, national sentiment and a strong sense of identity among youth'.²

¹ Mihiri Warnasuriya, *Building the 'Sri Lankan nation' through education: The identity politics of teaching history in a multicultural post-war society* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge 2018), p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Yet, state-led history education in Sri Lanka features substantive deficiencies arising from both overinclusion (highlighting a largely Sinhala-Buddhist narrative of ownership and authenticity of the island) and omission (inadequate coverage of minorities, except as ‘outsiders’ or ‘invaders’). The curriculum often reflects a biased narrative, emphasizing particular historical events while downplaying or completely omitting others, thereby ignoring the rich diversity of the island's history.³

The History Department of the National Institute of Education (NIE) is the institution that develops the history curriculum and the relevant Teachers’ Guides. For over a decade, academics including historians such as Professor Nirmal Ranjit Dewasiri and Professor Nira Wickramasinghe have attempted to engage and advise the NIE to reform the history curriculum and the way teachers are trained to promote national education goals and expected competencies of students in their classrooms. Similarly, the Lead Researcher engaged the current head of the History Department at the NIE, Ms. Chandima Dharmapala, who offered some insights into curriculum development and reform.

The curriculum is revised every eight years: the latest amendments were made in 2023. However, due to the economic crisis, a shortage of resources for printing the new textbooks has resulted in a delay in the launch of the new curriculum. Ms. Dharmapala revealed that the key changes to the curriculum would be the inclusion of more visual/pictorial information in textbooks and access to online resources. However, the substance of the history syllabi across secondary schools remains largely unchanged. When questioned about the lack of histories featuring minorities in Sri Lanka, Ms. Dharmapala responded that such topics were sensitive and might hurt the feelings of such minorities, such as the Malays (*‘hitha ridenewa ne?’*). The assertion appears to come from a perspective that minorities are inherently associated with ‘foreignness’, violence, and conquest – and therefore their inclusion would necessarily be a difficult history to consume. The alternative of telling positive histories of minorities, of their contributions to culture, language, and diversity more broadly, did not appear to be a consideration.

Pedagogical issues – rote learning and examination-centric approaches

The pedagogical approach employed in state-led history education exacerbates the entrenched problem. Rote learning and an examination-centric focus dominate classrooms, fostering a culture where memorisation takes precedence over critical analysis. Students are often encouraged to rote-learn historical facts to excel in examinations rather than engaging in a deeper understanding of the events and their implications.

Teacher-centred learning environments further perpetuate this issue, as educators, constrained by rigid curricula and examination pressures, struggle to facilitate interactive and engaging history lessons. Such an emphasis limits the development of analytical skills, stifling intellectual curiosity and contributing to generations of students ill-equipped to question historical narratives. Significantly, Ms. Dharmapala explained that the proposed curriculum reforms include a shift away from a total emphasis on exams. Instead, a credit system is due to be introduced, in which a certain percentage of a student’s performance will be assessed on course work produced during the school year (in addition to examinations). If such a change takes place, there might be an opportunity to encourage teachers to adopt new teaching

³ Natasha Karunaratne, *The Battleground of Sri Lankan History Education: Barriers to Teaching Inclusive Histories* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2021).

methods, such as field visits to museums, to encourage children to think through objects and other materials rather than simply memorising and regurgitating ‘facts’ from school textbooks.

Furthermore, most schools in Sri Lanka are segregated by language medium. For example, the table below highlights that 62% of schools are Sinhala-medium and 29% of schools are Tamil-medium. Less than 1% of state schools would bring Sinhala and Tamil-medium students into daily contact with each other. Thus, students go through much of their education in a mono-ethnic environment. Ongoing research by Nideka Nanayakkara suggests that as Sinhala-medium students (who are overwhelmingly Sinhalese in ethnicity) progress through secondary school, they increasingly gain a sense of pride in the history of their community, and reflect on their history of development, technological advancement and their tolerance of ‘others’.⁴ By contrast, Nanayakkara’s interviews with Tamil-medium students (who were Tamil in ethnicity) suggests that minority students felt increasingly alienated due to the minimal coverage of their own community’s history or contributions to society in the school textbooks. Thus, it could be argued that the existing state history education system is actively fostering division and alienation within youth communities.

Meanwhile, Professor Dewasiri and Nanayakkara both emphasized how influential a teacher’s ideological position could be on their students’ understanding of history. These researchers suggest that history teachers are often not offered serious training in the discipline of history, and are likely to impart their own visions, biases, and prejudices onto students while teaching. Given that schools are segregated by language, teachers will also typically be from a particular linguistic and ethnic background. In that context, poorly trained teachers are likely to introduce their own interpretations of histories into their classrooms, based on their own cultural or community narratives or experiences, which may or may not be appropriate for a student’s history education.

Schools by Language Medium/s of Instruction

Language Medium/s	Number of Schools	Percentage
Sinhala medium	6,323	62.3%
Tamil medium	3,026	29.8%
Sinhala and Tamil mediums	40	04.%
Sinhala and bilingual (S/E) mediums	552	5.4%
Tamil and bilingual (T/E) mediums	170	1.7%
Trilingual (Sinhala, Tamil and Bilingual: S/E and/or T/E mediums)	35	0.3%

Source: Ministry of Education, Annual School Census of Sri Lanka: Summary Report 2021.

⁴ Nideka Nanayakkara, ‘Issues in integrating reconciliation and historical consciousness in history Sri Lanka’s secondary schools history curriculum’, (Paper presented to the workshop ‘Living with Violent Heritage: contests and co-existence in post-war Sri Lanka’ at ICES, 25 March 2023).

Inaccessible channels for contestation or change

The entrenched nature of the problem is compounded by limited accessibility to channels through which the substance of history education can be contested or changed. The National Archives, a potential resource for diverse historical perspectives, remain underutilised and inaccessible. The cost of accessing materials (i.e. photocopying and scanning even on personal photography devices) and the suspicion with which visitors to the National Archives have in the past been treated, have rendered the Archives a largely inaccessible space for researchers.⁵

According to Ramla Wahab-Salman, past offers of external expertise and funding for digitisation of certain collections have been rejected. In this context, new and alternative archiving practices, including digitisation, have been developed in the non-state history education space. Significantly, however, changes in the senior management at the National Archives in the last decade have slowly yielded positive developments. The current Director-General, Dr. Nadeera Rupasinghe, has introduced new processes for conservation and restoration of paper records and audio-visual archives. She notes that a dedicated digitisation project of Dutch records held at the National Archives is due to begin in 2024 once a new digitisation machine arrives from the Netherlands. Such positive developments are also connected to the restitution of artefacts stolen from the former Kandyan Kingdom during the Dutch colonial occupation. The return of the objects from December 2023 onwards has improved opportunities for strengthening cultural cooperation between Sri Lanka and the Netherlands, and creating new conversations around colonial history.⁶

In spite of limited progress, the state-led history education system in Sri Lanka grapples with substantive, pedagogical, and access-related issues that collectively contribute to an entrenched problem resistant to reform. The lack of inclusivity in content perpetuates historical misconceptions and a sense of exclusion among certain ethnic or religious groups. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive approach, encompassing curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, and enhanced accessibility to channels that encourage diverse perspectives. However, attempts to challenge or amend processes at the NIE face resistance from political authorities, creating a stagnant educational environment that hinders the development of critical thinking skills among students.⁷ In that context, this report next examines the ways in which non-state history education initiatives in Sri Lanka promote critical thinking, inclusivity, and a nuanced understanding of the country's complex past.

4. Non-State Alternative Spaces and Approaches to History Education

This section analyses various initiatives relating to history education in Sri Lanka. It focuses primarily on the work of non-state actors and institutions, using perspectives and insights

⁵ Namini Wijedasa, 'National Archives young DG target of controversy over Dutch records', *The Sunday Times*, 20 December 2020, accessible at: <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/201220/news/national-archives-young-dg-target-of-controversy-over-dutch-records-426140.html>.

⁶ Uditha Jayasinghe, 'Netherlands returns colonial-era artefacts to Sri Lanka', *Reuters*, 5 December 2023, accessible at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/netherlands-returns-colonial-era-artefacts-sri-lanka-2023-12-05/>.

⁷ 'NIE Crisis: Members Sacked After Advising Ranil To Carry Out A 'Comprehensive Review'', *Colombo Telegraph*, 27 July 2016, accessible at: <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/nie-crisis-members-sacked-after-advising-ranil-to-carry-out-a-comprehensive-review/>.

provided by key informants. It also refers to the initiatives of individuals and institutions that work across the state-non-state divide. The following table lists the key informants interviewed, their affiliations and their potential reach.

Key Informant	Associated Institution(s)/initiatives	Relationship to the state	Target audience
Dr. Darshi Thoradeniya	Head of History Department, University of Colombo (UoC), UoC History and Community Project, Member of the Living with Violent Heritage Project	State/non-state	History educators, students
Prof. Nira Wickramasinghe	Chair/Professor of Modern South Asian Studies, Leiden University	Non-state	Academics, researchers
Pramodha Weerasekera	Curator of Education and Public Programmes, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka	Non-state	General public, educators
Ramla Wahab-Salman	American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies, '72 Project	Non-state	Academics, researchers
Dr. Tara De Mel	Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy, Former Secretary to the Ministry of Education	Non-state/state	Academics, researchers
Prof. Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri	History Department, University of Colombo; Former National Institute of Education Advisory Council Member, UoC History and Community Project	State/non-state	History students, educators, general public
Johann Peiris	Head of Education, Collective for Historical Dialogue and Memory	Non-state	Educators, students, researchers, general public
Dr. Nadeera Rupasinghe	Director General of the Sri Lanka National Archives	State	Researchers, academics
Radhika Hettiarachchi	Herstories Project, Community Memorialisation Project, Sex Work during Conflict Oral History Series.	Non-state	General public
Sarah Kabir	'72 Project, Voices of Peace	Non-State	General public
Ruwani Bandara	YouTube channel: Patta History	Non-state	General public
Rochel Canagasabey	Instagram page: history_lka	Non-state	General public
Ambassador Bonnie Horbach	The Dutch Embassy in Colombo	Non-state	General public
Chryshane Mendis	Archaeologist, Cultural Officer at the Dutch Embassy in Colombo	Non-state	General public

Hasini Haputhantri	Senior Researcher, International Center for Ethnic Studies	Non-state	General public, educators, researchers
Nideka Nanayakkara	Independent Researcher, Probationary Lecturer in History, University of Colombo	State/non-state	History students, educators, researchers
Mike Gabriel	Minor Matters, Museum of Religious Freedom	Non-state	General public

The alternative history education initiatives mapped out in this report are divided into those that: i) raise awareness among a general audience (both youth and adults); and ii) target specialists in the field of history (i.e. educators, including teachers and university lecturers, and academics, such as professional historians, researchers, and scholars or practitioners from adjacent fields like archaeology, art history, museum studies).

These two types of initiatives are characterised by significantly different approaches to history education; they are motivated by different aims, centred around different activities, use diverse strategies, demonstrate unique strengths, and face varying challenges. However, there is still some overlap. As several individuals and organisations surveyed work across the generalist-specialist divide, they are featured in both sections.

Generalist knowledge creation

Initiatives involving generalist knowledge creation produce work aimed at educating the general public, focusing on raising awareness about particular historical periods, issues, and themes in Sri Lanka's history that are not covered in the state education system. This type of initiative primarily serves to address the first problem highlighted above – substantive deficiencies in the school history syllabus. They seek to fill gaps in the general public's knowledge of Sri Lanka's history and widen public understanding, often with the underlying motivation of advocating for change by addressing deeper issues such as violence against minorities, and aiding reconciliation. Most initiatives collate and repurpose existing sources of information and focus on re-packaging it in a more appealing manner. However, some initiatives are actively involved in creating new knowledge through primary research, which include oral history interviews and archival research. Certain initiatives, such as the recently established academic press, *Tambapanni Academic Publishers* (TAP) offer both repackaging and new knowledge creation. For example, to make international and local history (among other humanities) scholarship more accessible in Sri Lanka, TAP reprints important Sri Lankan history books that have gone out of print, and republishes affordable local editions of new scholarly literature published abroad. Furthermore, TAP supports researchers to produce original analyses of key contemporary issues as part of its 'TAP Essentials' series.⁸

Rochel Canagasabey, the founder of the Instagram account *@history_lka* (that has over 6,500 followers) stated that his experience of learning about the state history syllabus and the gaps it contained encouraged him to fill those gaps through his research. He highlighted several problems with state-endorsed historical narratives, including: (i) the disproportionate space given to Sinhalese history with very little given to the Tamil community and almost none for other minority communities; and (ii) the exclusion of most post-independence history, with no

⁸ 'TAP Essentials', *Tambapanni Academic Publishers*, accessible at: <https://www.tambapannipublishers.lk/tap-essentials/>.

coverage of the armed conflict or insurrections. His aim is to bridge the divide among different communities in how they understand various historical events.

Similarly, the aim of Project '72, a documentary (in production) on Sri Lanka's post-Independence history, is 'promoting coexistence, social cohesion and harmony' by 'educating, filling knowledge gaps, raising awareness, memorialising witness accounts and experiences.'⁹ Another example is Radhika Hettiarachchi's public exhibition on Women's Histories of Sex Work (December 2023 – January 2024), which aims to shine a spotlight on an issue that is surrounded by social stigma, state intimidation, and violence. Her research on sex work during the armed conflict aimed to connect the past to the present, and more specifically to advocate for legal change for fairer treatment of sex workers. Importantly, initiatives that raise awareness among the general public attempt to do more than just communicate information – they also aim to advocate for change.

Several interviewees highlighted the importance of starting conversations and facilitating a more critical approach to history by raising awareness of different perspectives and the extent of the unknown. By adding layers of historical research to issues that might be primarily 'learnt' through popular culture, family oral traditions and folklore, or state narratives, generalist initiatives can help illustrate the complexity of Sri Lankan history. For example, the Museum of Religious Freedom established by Minor Matters reveals the presence of multiple religious communities in Sri Lanka over centuries. Such historical research challenges the hegemonic narrative that minority religious communities are outsiders who do not belong as equal citizens in Sri Lanka.

The success of these initiatives often depends on meaningful audience engagement and effective communication. The initiatives examined use a variety of mediums for generalist knowledge creation in both the online and offline spaces. The most used mediums are exhibitions, publications, documentaries, and other visual media, along with social educational programmes (such as talks and workshops). Meanwhile, interviewees reflected on some of the key strategies they employed to connect seriously with their audiences.

(i) Embracing digital tools for storytelling

Several interviewees highlighted the importance of using alternative mediums of storytelling, such as digital tools to draw in a larger audience. For example, *Patta History* is a generalist initiative whose initial objective was to teach history using a new and engaging medium – YouTube videos. The earliest videos focused on stories from state history syllabi, such as that of Parakramabahu I. However, the producer of *Patta History*, Ruwani Bandara, observed that animation could be used as a tool to lessen the burden of telling a heavy, emotional story. Although *Patta History* did not set out to engage in advocacy, it features 'lesser-known histories' and plans to increasingly tell histories that have contemporary relevance. Uniquely, *Patta History* aims to reach an international (as opposed to local) audience and thus primarily produce videos in English. Animated histories in the form of YouTube videos are, therefore, an accessible medium through which they can reach their target audience of second and third generation Sri Lankan diaspora youth.

Another initiative that recognised the need to diversify beyond text-based histories is Project '72. Sarah Kabir noted that there is substantial scholarly and well-researched information about

⁹ 'The '72 Survey Report', (shared by Sarah Kabir, 26 September 2023).

Sri Lanka's post-Independence history even though it is not included in state history syllabi. However, she suggested that very few people engage such content for reasons including difficulty in sourcing such publications, the use of heavy or technical language that is inaccessible to the average reader, and a lack of time to seek out and read scholarly literature. In that context, Project '72 chose to produce a documentary to engage a larger audience on key events relating to the ethnic conflict and youth insurrections. Documentaries appear to be an increasingly popular method of communicating forgotten or difficult histories. Two important history and heritage-based documentaries supported by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) that were released in 2023 included *Minarets: The Music of the Muslims* by Nadya Bhimani Perera and *In Plain Sight: Searching for Truth Behind Sri Lanka's Mass Graves* by Ruvin Perera.¹⁰

Some exhibitions, such as Hettiarachchi's Women's Histories of Sex Work and the Collective for Historical Dialogue and Memory (CHDM) initiative ROOTED: Histories of the Malaiyaga Tamils, also leveraged digital tools by including audio or video clips of individuals speaking about their experiences. This approach added an additional dimension to the way audiences connect to the histories on display. Some academic research groups developed public webpages to raise awareness of their research findings. For example, the Everyday Lankan History website represents an attempt to communicate academic research produced at Leiden University and Radboud University on 'everyday experience and plural practice in Dutch Institutions in Sri Lanka 1700-1800' in an accessible manner.¹¹

For generalist initiatives, embracing digital tools has aided effective communication. Their audiences may find it easier to access, absorb and connect with visual or auditory information, rendering videos, documentaries, or even podcasts useful mediums for this type of initiative.

(ii) Drawing people in with less controversial topics

One significant strategy employed by generalist knowledge producers was to draw audiences in by using unifying topics. Canagasabay of *@history_lka* explained how he initially intended to use his platform to explore narratives of violence in Sri Lanka's history, but soon realised the importance of connecting with people through less divisive and more unifying topics such as cricket, natural disasters, and the colonial period. He also observed that he was able to bring attention to more controversial issues by looking at how they were tied to more neutral topics like food and clothing, such as how the history of *kottu roti* is tied to the civil war.

This type of strategy is particularly relevant to social media initiatives. For offline initiatives, two constraints make this strategy difficult. First, the amount of information that can be provided is limited by physical constraints, such as the size and layout of exhibition space, or the time allocated for a particular programme, incentivising focus on one topic. By contrast, with social media, content can continuously be expanded and added to. Second, for most offline initiatives, and even some online initiatives that do not use social media, audiences must actively choose to participate. On social media, while individuals do have to choose to engage with content, they are more likely to encounter it passively. People may be drawn to follow a particular page or channel and then passively receive educational content about different topics.

¹⁰ 'Minarets; The Music of the Muslims', ICES, accessible at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNYyy6KObCw>; 'In Plain Sight: English Sub', ICES, accessible at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYw_7WKUYTY.

¹¹ 'About Us', Everyday Lankan History, accessible at: <https://everydaylankanhistory.com/about-us-2/>.

(iii) Using art and objects as a starting point

Another strategy that has been deployed for offline initiatives, particularly exhibitions, is to use objects and art as a starting point to explore history. Pramodha Weerasekera noted that one of the Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art's (MMCA) priorities is to use art as tools for and of learning. For example, the MMCA's exhibition *Encounters* used a mix of photographs, paintings, objects, and other works to tell the story of the Non-Aligned Movement and Sri Lanka's role in it. By putting disparate works in conversation with each other, the MMCA encouraged audiences to not only engage the artwork, but also to examine and understand a part of Sri Lanka's global history.

Similarly, the CHDM exhibition *ROOTED: Histories of the Malaiyaga Tamils* grounded the information it provided through objects that represented the experiences of this neglected community. Meanwhile, the Dutch Embassy, working with the National Archives in connection with its restitution efforts, aims to use the objects returned by the Netherlands to create new conversations around culture, geopolitics, and history from the starting point of 'a lost heritage reclaimed.'

This strategy is useful in generalist initiatives because it helps to manifest history and create a tangible link between the target audience and the histories under examination. While these physical exhibits/artefacts are accompanied by words/texts, they offer an important materiality that is often lacking in school education.

(iv) Using social educational programmes

The use of educational programmes was a strategy deployed by several individuals and organisations across the generalist and specialist initiatives analysed. For example, the MMCA offers several programmes for children and adults to help them engage ongoing exhibitions in meaningful ways. The programmes take the form of workshops, talks, and reading groups, and explore some aspect of the historical narratives featured in the relevant exhibition in greater depth. Even programmes like curator's tours offer the public alternate avenues to engage with and learn about history.

Walking history tours offered by CHDM and archaeologist Chryshane Mendis offer the public the opportunity to learn more about the history of the places they frequent and to perhaps question their previously received knowledge of such places. Community conversations initiated by Hettiarachchi brought diverse groups of people from different regions together, giving them the opportunity to hear about the lived history of other communities.

The use of sociable educational programmes that are not linked to examinations or required outputs allow people to engage history by connecting with other people and places. However, this strategy is difficult to implement at a larger scale because of space, time, and resource constraints. It gives these initiatives depth, but not necessarily breadth.

Specialist knowledge creation and network formation

In contrast to the generalist initiatives discussed above, specialist initiatives aim to assist educators and academics, focusing on providing specific groups of people with tools to navigate the field of history education. Specialist initiatives focus on a diverse range of history professionals, including academics and researchers in history and related fields, such as anthropology, archaeology, and art history, and history teachers and lecturers in both secondary and tertiary education. This type of initiative primarily aims to address the second and third problems highlighted above – pedagogical issues and inaccessibility of archives for contestation and change.

Similar to the motivations of individuals and organisations advancing generalist initiatives, those involved in specialist initiatives often intend to drive history education reform to facilitate social change. For example, Minor Matters conducts workshops to build capacity among youth who work in community-based organisations and human rights to educate them on the right of freedom of religion or belief. Minor Matters’ trainers use the Museum of Religious Freedom as an interactive, digital tool to teach a curriculum that discusses ethnicity, identity, religion, the nation and the state, and citizenship with the aim of improving the civic mindedness of their participants.

Oral history initiatives have been undertaken to create new repositories of information for specialists to refer. The underlying goal of these initiatives is not simply to collect and preserve random information, but to collect underrepresented narratives whose use may facilitate peacebuilding and social cohesion.

In addressing pedagogical issues by training and supporting history educators to employ new methods of teaching, or by preserving narratives and producing accessible archives, specialist initiatives also expose participants to histories that challenge dominant narratives and produce new knowledge that fill gaps in the state history syllabus. Such exposure for history school teachers, for example, could increase the likelihood of alternative narratives reaching school children and the general public. In that context, specialist initiatives reflect shared goals with generalist initiatives.

Initiatives targeting history specialists aim to empower individuals to improve the way history is understood, taught, and learnt in two ways. First, they deliberately highlight the omissions or silences in existing historical knowledge and narratives. Second, they build capacity to fill those gaps by facilitating understanding, suggesting alternative pedagogical methods, and providing access to underrepresented narratives. These initiatives, unlike those aimed at the general public, tend to be targeted at specific, limited groups, enabling them to avoid negative attention. Discussion with interviewees revealed a few different approaches and strategies used to support and build capacity in specialists.

(i) Teacher training and workshops

The most direct method used in specialist initiatives is conducting training and workshops for specialists. These initiatives focus on various aspects of history education. For example, the MMCA invites school teachers to visit their exhibitions and holds programmes for them. The MMCA also encourages teachers to expose their students to materials beyond the school textbook by bringing students to the museum. This type of initiative not only builds teachers’ knowledge of narratives not necessarily covered in the syllabus, but also exposes them to different teaching methods, such as using art and objects to explore historical narratives. Weerasekera highlighted the importance of MMCA’s ‘down-up’ approach in these

programmes – by first forming a relationship with teachers and then working with them to get school administrations on board for future opportunities.

The History and Community Project run by the University of Colombo and funded by GIZ brought students from the University of Colombo and University of Jaffna together through field visits. It aimed to show students from the North and the South that there are multiple historical interpretations about Sri Lanka's past and encouraged Sinhalese and Tamil-speaking students 'to share and discuss interpretations of a common past under the guidance of experts in the field'.¹² Several alumni of the History and Community Project are now teachers themselves.

Building on this productive model, ICES and Itihas developed two workshop series targeting (i) history school teachers, and (ii) junior and probationary history university lecturers. Each workshop had a theme chosen for its contemporary relevance (e.g. 'contested heritage') and brought teachers and lecturers together from multiple districts across the island. A third workshop series was developed by ICES for teachers and researchers more broadly, albeit focused on the way art history could inform public history. Meanwhile, Hasini Haputhanthri's project on theatre in education trained teachers from four schools on how to integrate the arts into classrooms.

Such initiatives may disrupt traditional teaching methods and help drive an ideological shift in educators by exposing them to histories that they may not have been familiar with. They also create a multiplier effect for the spread of ideas, as every 're-trained' educator could potentially pass on new and expansive ideas to the students they teach.

Despite receiving training, in many cases, teachers are still constrained by the education system within which they function. They are unable to implement some of their learning due to time constraints that require them to follow the syllabus and ensure their students can perform well under a system that requires rote-learning historical facts to excel in examinations. However, if educators find ways to incorporate their learning into their classroom activities, capacity for change still exists.

(ii) Building networks and thought leadership

Specialist initiatives have also helped to build networks among history professionals by facilitating opportunities for research sharing and collaboration. Such network formation is supported through similar methods described above, such as through workshops and training, as well as by hosting academic discussion groups or conferences, and facilitating virtual networks and reading groups.

For example, the objectives of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS) are to strengthen scholarship and research links and promote the exchange of ideas internationally. Ramla Wahab-Salman explained how AISLS convenes history conferences, seminars and reading groups, both online and offline, to connect Sri Lankan scholars with international academics. By building networks and facilitating conversations between scholars from different backgrounds, such specialist initiatives promote thought leadership and foster the growth of new ideas on history. Such initiatives have also helped to develop meaningful

¹² 'The History and Community Project', *University of Colombo*, accessible at: https://arts.cmb.ac.lk/history/?page_id=13.

relationships and collaborations between emerging scholars who work on Sri Lanka from within domestic and overseas institutions.

Such network building initiatives have not always been successful. Johann Peiris noted that when CHDM attempted to build a similar network among the alumni of the History and Community Project, they had difficulty sustaining such an endeavour. Some participants were simply not interested in continued participation in a network, while some teachers noted that school hierarchies made it difficult for them to participate. Thus, the sustainability of some networks remains a challenge, especially among school teachers.

(iii) Improving access through digitisation and guides

An indirect strategy to empower history specialists is to increase access to resources for research. For example, AISLS has developed several electronic guides to support research and scholarship, such as: (i) a comprehensive guide to all the research libraries in Sri Lanka and how to access them; (ii) a guide to locating colonial photographs; and (iii) a guide on best practices on research in Sri Lanka.¹³ Since 2019, AISLS has also focused on the preservation of historical material, undertaking to digitise various collections to make them more accessible.

This type of initiative, though not directly educating history professionals, is crucial to improving access to historical information and resources. Such initiatives provide avenues for historians and researchers to contest dominant narratives of history in Sri Lanka. By providing information on what resources exist, it also aids professionals to identify the lacunas, so that they may work towards filling them.

(iv) Documenting and archiving

Some specialist initiatives have focused on providing avenues for contestation and advocating change. This type of initiative aims to document living history and build new historical archives on various historical themes that fall outside the dominant narrative. Documenting and archiving can expand the resources available to historians and other specialists, providing new materials with which to challenge entrenched ideas within history education in Sri Lanka.

For example, an oral history initiative under the Living with Violent Heritage Project focused on youth insurrections in Sri Lanka. The initiative involved 26 interviews with former JVP cadres conducted by Prof. Dewasiri and Dr. Darshi Thoradeniya and served to document histories of the 1971 and 1987-89 insurgencies. Hettiarachchi's Herstories archival project meanwhile documented the experience of mothers from the South and the North who were affected by war and peace, revealing family histories of love and loss.¹⁴

This type of initiative is vital to addressing the deficiencies in state education, which tends to over rely on extremely old primary sources such as the *Mahavamsa* and physical ruins, and does not cover the post-Independence period. Non-state initiatives are increasingly preserving voices, memories and other sources that can support a diversification of historical narratives that might be accessed in the future.

¹³ For example, 'Guide to Research Libraries in Sri Lanka', AISLS, accessible at: <https://www.aisls.org/guide-to-research-libraries-in-sri-lanka/>.

¹⁴ 'Herstories of Resilience and Hope', *Herstories*, accessible at: <https://theherstoryarchive.org/about-us/>.

However, these archives can only serve capacity building if historians are aware of them and can easily access them. These emerging archives need to be included in the resource guides that have been developed by other institutions and provided to participants in history workshops, training, and conferences.

5. Challenges

Key informants and the secondary literature revealed four key challenges to effective alternative history education. These challenges include: (i) language and the weakness of translations, (ii) *ad hoc* funding, (iii) resistance from state institutions, and (iv) political risks.

Language and translations

At the micro-level, the language in which alternative history education initiatives take place is fundamental to the success of the initiative. Key informants across the board agreed that English was insufficient to effectively reach mass audiences, while it was sufficient for specialist meetings such as AISLS workshops that are aimed at both Sri Lankan and international scholars. Importantly, significant efforts have gone into providing Sinhala and Tamil translations (for example, in documentaries or social media posts/videos). Despite such efforts, participants in various initiatives often observed that translations were inaccurate (for example, overly literal translations that lose nuance) and lacked depth. By contrast, developing content in the vernacular languages will allow specialists to tap into distinct ways of thinking, culturally contingent rhetoric, and communication norms of that language, which translations cannot adequately capture. Therefore, merely providing translations is unlikely to succeed in meeting the objective of communicating effectively in Sinhala and Tamil. Instead, it is necessary for those who develop and deliver history content to do so in Sinhala and Tamil, rather than offer belatedly translated content.

Ad hoc funding

Access to funding varied vastly across the range of alternative history education initiatives surveyed. Several initiatives, such as *Patta History* and *@history_lka* are self-funded with occasional limited funding to cover a certain topic or aspect of history from an interested third-party. For example, Search for Common Ground supported *@history_lka* to raise awareness on conflict histories in Sri Lanka. Certain individuals who produce history research and curate exhibitions seek to maintain their independence by applying for grants to implement their selected projects, rather than produce commissioned research selected by a donor. Nevertheless, the type of historical research that is likely to receive funding tends to be connected to donor priorities, aimed at important areas such as reconciliation, peacebuilding, human rights, and conflict. In that context, other areas of history, such as economic or legislative history, or even colonial history, may not to receive the same level of financial support despite having the potential to improve wider understanding on issues like the economy and constitutional reform.

By contrast, institutions such as AISLS and CHDM benefit from more sustained institutional funding from governments and non-governmental organisations and maintain the ability to develop their own core focus areas while also taking into account donor priorities. For instance, AISLS is funded primarily through annual grants from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the US State Department and from the US Department of Education. CHDM pitches projects to specific individuals or organisations that have an interest in an area such as

exhibitions to support their work. In this context, even institutions such as CHDM referred to the need to constantly raise funds, threatening the sustainability of alternative history education initiatives.

Resistance from state institutions

In general, relevant state institutions, such as the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education (NIE) were identified as unsupportive and occasionally bordering on hostile towards alternative history education initiatives. For example, Minor Matters were advised to avoid the use of the term ‘museum’ in conversations with the state (despite the fact that their main historical project is a Virtual Museum) if they wanted to take their product into schools, as it could lead to delays in the approvals process. Notwithstanding such suspicion of non-state history initiatives, the Ministry of Education and the NIE are crucial institutions to work with if the aim of an initiative is to reach school children and history teachers at large. For instance, the pilot ICES/Itihas/KURVE Wustrow workshop for school history teachers (discussed above) targeted 30 teachers. In total, however, there are 15,000 history teachers in Sri Lanka who could benefit from such training workshops. It is unlikely that a non-state institution could have the logistical or financial capacity to effectively conduct training for a critical mass of school history teachers without the support and involvement of state institutions. Thus, engaging with the Ministry of Education and NIE at some level was deemed important by various KIIs, who believed that the state was ultimately crucial to the transformation of history education reform in Sri Lanka.

Political risks

Key informants were asked specifically what risks they had experienced or envisaged in terms of the broader political environment. As the space of alternative history education in Sri Lanka is still very small, the political risks involved in conducting such initiatives has been negligible. Embassies appear to have differing positions on whether history education fits within the purview of their cultural policies in Sri Lanka, while aware that ‘history’ is deeply politicised and contested across the island. One key informant suggested that there were specific challenges in working on histories that concern human rights, but that other histories were not typically seen as threatening to the state. The key informant observed that ‘as long as it does not directly affect Members of Parliament or happen in an election year, it goes under the radar’. As 2024-2025 are set to be election years, this note of caution is worth taking into consideration.

6. Potential Areas for Future Programming of Itihas

The following potential areas for future initiatives have been identified against the backdrop of the existing alternative history education landscape, the challenges identified, and the expertise of the core team at Itihas.

Programmes focused on generalist and specialist audiences require different approaches, and therefore distinct competencies. The expertise of the team at Itihas is in academia – specifically in history and anthropology – and in data-driven and analytical research. Meanwhile, there are only a limited number of trained historians working in the alternative history education space as well as limited financial resources. In that context, Itihas is likely to have a greater impact by developing the skills of the abovementioned ‘specialist audience’, who in turn can create a multiplier effect in terms of delivering history education to a ‘generalist audience’.

Creating networks of specialists at various levels of education

(i) History university lecturers

The ICES-Itihas-Kurwe Wustrow workshop for history university lecturers created, for the first time, a network of young, junior and probationary history lecturers from six state universities from the North, South, East, West, and Centre of the country. Itihas should continue to engage this cohort of university lecturers who: (a) primarily educate history undergraduate students, of whom some might go on to become history school teachers; and (b) will eventually become heads of departments or senior education professionals in state institutions. These lecturers will be exposed to the idea that history as a discipline is not just about learning a large volume of information but about developing essential critical thinking skills, such as judgement, synthesis, and creativity. Currently, state universities do not have a shared history undergraduate or postgraduate syllabus. Thus, a key focus will be on identifying divergences in the narratives taught across the island and exploring the ways a more inclusive, pluralistic understanding of Sri Lankan history can be taught. These lecturers will also be exposed to the vast array of resources increasingly accessible to historians, such as resource guides, newly digitised collections, as well as new methods of archiving materials.

(ii) Master educators for history school teachers

Itihas has developed a concept and proposal to train the master educators of the National Colleges of Education in Sri Lanka who are responsible for training state school history teachers. Thus, in the current context where training the current contingent of 15,000 school teachers is impractical, the proposed workshop series will target these master educators whose role is to train future school history teachers. It is necessary to involve the relevant state institutions in this process to some degree for sustained participation and approvals for such an envisaged workshop series. The Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education will be informed about the concept and invited to send representatives who may observe or even participate in the training. ICES and the Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy have expressed an interest in collaborating on such an initiative following the identification of an appropriate source of funding.

(iii) Itihas Historians' Circle

Itihas will train a core group of young historians with undergraduate or master's degrees in history. These historians (who include junior university lecturers) will be trained to create and conduct workshops such as those delivered for school teachers and university lecturers in 2023. Thus, by creating a Historians' Circle, professional historians who have been trained to conceptualise and deploy new and improved pedagogies for teaching history can contribute to the continuous process of working with history educators at all levels ranging from universities, to teacher training institutes, to schools. Once again, the idea of leveraging a multiplier effect is central to this intervention.

Consultancy and advisory service for history producers

In the course of conducting KIIs, several of the non-professional historians who were involved in the production of history initiatives such as *Patta History* and *Project '72* requested that Itihas provide guidance on historical content, including offering a content review service, as well as on how and where to access historical resources such as archives and individual experts. On the one hand, given the limited personnel at Itihas, taking on commissioned historical research is not necessarily a feasible option. On the other hand, review of specific areas of history, if it falls within the expertise of the Itihas team, could be offered. Meanwhile, advice on conducting historical research or further education in history (such as applying for history PhDs or writing a history thesis) is a potential avenue for consideration. Importantly, for ethical reasons, advice on further education in history should necessarily be provided free of charge.

7. Conclusion

This report mapped the alternative history education landscape in Sri Lanka. It first laid out the existing state of history education in the country. It identified as major problems the substantive deficiencies in the school history syllabus, pedagogical issues connected with rote learning and examination-centric approaches, and the inaccessibility of channels that could be used for contestation or change. Based on this problem analysis, the report set out the alternative spaces and approaches for non-state history education. These spaces and approaches were distinguished based on the target audience, i.e. ‘generalists’ and ‘specialists’. The range of strategies used in generalist initiatives was explored, including the use of digital tools for storytelling, and using art and objects to talk about broader histories. Similarly, the report analysed the various approaches that specialist initiatives take, such as creating knowledge networks, and developing processes for documenting and archiving.

Based on the experience of the key informants who were interviewed and the secondary literature, the report identified four primary challenges to effective alternative history education. These challenges included the weaknesses involved in translations, particularly in contexts where initiatives were developed and delivered in English, financial resource constraints, and state institutional resistance to reform.

Serious reform in the history education sector cannot take place over the short term. Instead, it must be seen as a generational project, whereby the youth in particular develop an appreciation for embracing Sri Lanka’s plural histories. In conclusion, the report suggested two major areas for future intervention by Itihas to promote a long-term transformation in history education in Sri Lanka. Such interventions would principally aim to create networks of specialists at various levels of education. Such specialists could in turn be expected to have a multiplier effect through their own future work in promoting history education reform in Sri Lanka.