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LANGUAGE AND VIOLENCE

THE POWER OF WORDS TO HARM, HEAL, OR TRANSFORM

A SRI LANKAN REFLECTION



The island's long struggle with ethnic conflict, political polarisation, and social inequality has shown repeatedly that words can do what weapons do: divide, destroy, and dehumanise. **Yet it has also shown that words can stitch together broken trust, speak dignity back into lives erased by violence, and invite communities into a deeper humanity.**



In Sri Lanka—a land of breathtaking beauty and painful histories—language has never been a neutral tool. It has been a weapon, a shield, a wound, and, at its best, a bridge. The island's long struggle with ethnic conflict, political polarisation, and social inequality has shown repeatedly that words can do what weapons do: divide, destroy, and dehumanise. Yet, it has also shown that words can stitch together broken trust, speak dignity back into lives erased by violence, and invite communities into a deeper humanity.

For decades, Sri Lanka's conflicts were narrated not only through bombs, bullets, or rebellions but also through powerful vocabularies of suspicion and exclusion. The rhetoric of “us versus them,” so familiar in global conflicts, appeared here in local forms—Sinhala versus Tamil, North versus South, soldier versus insurgent, patriot versus traitor. These binaries did not arise suddenly. They were cultivated slowly through political speeches, media narratives, school textbooks, and everyday conversations.

The Power to Wound

Language in Sri Lanka has long carried the weight of ideological battles. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956 was not merely a linguistic policy but a narrative declaration - one that defined linguistic identity as the gateway to political belonging. For Tamils, it signalled the erasure of their language and dignity. For Sinhala speakers, it symbolised cultural restoration. Either way, language became not a shared medium of coexistence but a symbol of power and grievance.

During the civil war, terms like “terrorist,” “traitor,” “enemy,” and “extremist” permeated public discourse. These words reshaped the imagination of a nation. Communities were painted with broad strokes of fear. Empathy became rare. Suspicion became normal. As Marshall Rosenberg observed, “Violence is the tragic expression of unmet needs” - yet, in Sri Lanka, dominant narratives obscured those unmet needs, portraying entire communities as existential threats rather than as human beings carrying fear, memory, and aspiration.



Even today, hate speech and social media misinformation are potent forces. Muslims are labelled as “invaders,” Christians as “converters,” plantation workers as “outsiders.” Repeated and amplified, these words narrow our moral imagination. They prepare society to tolerate discrimination long before violence erupts. Conflict always begins in language.

The Silence That Harms

Just as harmful as violent speech is the silence that erases suffering. In Sri Lanka, the perspectives of victims - families of the disappeared, war widows, plantation communities, displaced fishermen, impoverished farmers—rarely penetrate national dialogue. Governments speak in the vocabulary of security, political elites in the language of ethnic mobilisation, and media houses often echo dominant narratives.

Silence becomes complicity when it allows harm to continue unchallenged. Desmond Tutu’s warning - “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor” - resonates painfully here. When stories of suffering are ignored or dismissed, violence becomes invisible, and its victims become unseen.

The Power to Heal

Yet Sri Lanka offers countless moments where language served as a balm rather than a blade. Following the 2025 Cyclone -Ditwa, communities crossed ethnic boundaries with compassion that softened decades of hostility. After the civil war, numerous reconciliation initiatives - led by religious groups, women’s collectives, and youth movements - used dialogue circles, storytelling, and theatre to rebuild trust.

Storytelling, especially, has been transformative. In Mullaitivu, Batticaloa, Mannar, Vavuniya, Puttalam, and Hatton, victims gather in safe spaces to share memories - sometimes trembling, sometimes resolute. These narratives restore dignity. Listening to them allows communities, often divided, to confront uncomfortable truths and rediscover humanity in one another.

Artists, poets, filmmakers, and journalists have also challenged dominant narratives, reminding the nation that language can reveal what politics tries to conceal: the human cost of conflict and the fragile hope of reconciliation.

Through leadership training, teacher formation, and digital storytelling projects, Loyola Campus equips a generation to resist racism, challenge misinformation, and become ambassadors of peace in their communities. **These exercises help young people reflect on the power of language, learn to express disagreement constructively, and transform narratives that might otherwise perpetuate prejudice or fear.**



Paths of Education, Dialogue, and Reconciliation

In 2024, we started a project “Paths and practices of education, dialogue and reconciliation in Sri Lanka - EDIRI, funded by AICS (Italian Agency for Development Cooperation), and promoted by Fondazione MAGIS ETS in Italy and The Trustees of the Society of Jesus - Sri Lanka Province, together with the Loyola Campus. We engage young people who are at the margins of the Sri Lankan society by offering a structured educational system which fosters critical thinking, dialogue, and transferable skills.

We seek to equip them to participate in an emerging knowledge-based economy while nurturing their capacity to question dominant narratives, resist dehumanising language, and contribute to social reconciliation. By strengthening local educational capacities and creating inclusive learning communities, we want to affirm education as a form of nonviolent action—one that empowers voices that too often are silenced and supports the construction of a more just, peaceful, and cohesive society.



In recent years, Loyola Campus has emerged as a crucial force in reshaping Sri Lanka's linguistic and relational landscape. Loyola Campuses' Mission – Educate, Empower and Transform – recognizes that peace begins with how people speak, listen, and understand one another.

The campus conducts programmes in Nonviolent Communication, conflict transformation, restorative dialogue, and community storytelling. Participants – youth, teachers, religious leaders, community members – learn how words can escalate tension or invite understanding. They explore how unspoken fears and unmet needs shape aggression and how compassionate language can soften hardened identities.

These workshops are more than lessons; they are encounters. Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese, Buddhist monks and Catholic priests, plantation workers and urban youth sit in shared circles of honesty. Through dialogue, they begin dismantling inherited stereotypes and rebuilding trust.

Because religion shapes the identity in Sri Lanka, Loyola Campuses' together with Fondazione MAGIS give special attention to interfaith engagement. Through shared reflection, peace

pilgrimages, and collaborative community projects, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim leaders rediscover common ground. Here, language becomes a bridge – clarifying fears, affirming shared values, and strengthening bonds of trust across communities.

Under the broader vision, we play an equally vital role in nurturing social cohesion across the island. With eight Centres in Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Thanamalwila, Boragas and Hatton, Loyola Campus brings together young people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds – often for the first time.

In these classrooms:

- Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim youth learn side-by-side.
- English, IT, and skills training become equalising tools.
- Students participate in dialogue sessions, cultural exchanges, and community projects.
- Teachers integrate restorative language and peace education into everyday lessons.

A Loyola classroom becomes a microcosm of the Sri Lanka we hope to build – one where difference is not a threat, but a shared resource.



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By combining ethical education with practical skill-building, Loyola Campus together with Fondazione MAGIS ETS, nurtures both the personal growth of participants and their capacity to contribute to social reconciliation and inclusive communities.

The Power to Transform

If hate speech can mobilise mobs, then compassionate speech can mobilise communities. If propaganda can sow division, then education

can cultivate critical thinking. If political rhetoric creates enemies, then dialogue can create neighbours.

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Transformation is cumulative—built word by word, story by story.

A Call to Responsibility

Sri Lanka’s future depends on the narratives we choose to nurture. Will we repeat the stories of fear and division, or will we craft new vocabularies of dignity and truth? Will our public language remain hostage to political agendas, or will we create spaces where humane speech can flourish?

Narayan Desai reminds us, “Words are not weapons, but they can wound more deeply than knives.” In Sri Lanka - a land that knows wounds and resilience - our responsibility is clear: to ensure our words heal more deeply than they harm.

Through the sustained efforts of educators, peacebuilders, storytellers, communities, and institutions like Loyola Campus, a new narrative is already being written—one of dignity, dialogue, and reconciliation.

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