



IS EDUCATION A RIGHT OR A PRIVILEGE? A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SYSTEM DURING THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS

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Abstract

The current economic crisis, which has affected citizens both globally and locally, has had a detrimental effect on all domains of human life, including the education sector. Sri Lanka, as a developing country, is severely affected by this economic crisis which has resulted in driving a greater part of the Sri Lankan student community, including those in tertiary education, into a dire state. Hence, students are now being forced to run the extra mile to make ends meet to ensure a holistic learning experience, despite being a part of the free education system, which Sri Lanka proudly claims to offer. As discussed in the social justice theory examined by John Rowl, education should be equal and fair to all despite individual differences, public or personal. In this light, this paper attempts to discuss how education, which is a fundamental right, is distanced from learners due to the heightened economic crisis, making it a privilege that only a handful can afford. This qualitative study was conducted using unstructured and semi-structured interview methods to collect data from sixty second year undergraduates following different degree programmes belonging to two state universities and one private university. Our findings reveal that education has become a burden for a majority of students, as even the everyday task of affording meals has become arduous. Owing to this situation students are now considering the option of dropping out of university as making a living has taken precedence over receiving an education. Therefore then, one could ask whether ‘education is a right, not a privilege’ still stands true.

Key words: Education, Right, Privilege, Economic Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning from the global pandemic of COVID-19 in 2019, the fuel crisis in 2022, and currently the economic crisis, the citizens of Sri Lanka have been hit with multiple challenges one after the other. These social issues have had an impact on all domains of human life, and Sri Lankans from all walks of life to varying degrees, with those from economically marginalized backgrounds having the biggest impact. For example, as a result of the pandemic and the fuel crisis education institutions were forced to resort to asynchronous teaching and learning which proved to be burdensome to those from underprivileged backgrounds due to lack of money, internet facilities, and technology.

Even though education is not recognized as a fundamental right in Sri Lanka, Article 27(2)h of the constitution guarantees equal access to education. On the other hand, the introduction of free education in 1945, was a measure taken to ensure that any citizen of Sri Lanka can study from primary to higher education without being limited by their economic background. Therefore, despite being a developing country, Sri Lanka has taken various steps to ensure equal access to education for all citizens, the practice of which will not be focused on in this paper.

Since all higher education institutes are no longer closed, and are conducting onsite classes, on the outlook life seems to have gone back to normal. However, a close examination of the society at a grassroot level will indicate that the situation is otherwise, and a terrible fate is emerging in the country's education sector, as a large number of students are considering the option of dropping out of university as they are finding it extremely difficult to find money to fulfill their most basic needs such as food. Making a living has certainly taken precedence over education, as the latter is seen as a 'waste of time', which students could use to generate an income for their entire family, raising the question whether education is still a right or whether it has become a privilege.

In this light, the objective of this study is to critically examine this on-going situation, as it could have detrimental effects on employment opportunities, literacy rate, economy, and development of the country. It also highlights the need to take action and create policies that address this adversity in order to retain education as a right and not a privilege that only a handful could afford.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative study for which data was gathered using the methods unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews, based on four major questions; what is the main source of income of your family?, how do you manage your expenses in university?, have you ever felt that university is a burden to you because of finances?, and do you think that free education is threatened because of the economic crisis?. It was decided to employ these two methods instead of a traditional questionnaire as a questionnaire with close ended questions would limit student responses. On the other hand, the employment of these two methods provided a more relaxed, safer, and a more enabling space for the students to express their ideas as discussing economic problems is an extremely sensitive issue.

The focus group, which was selected through the cluster sampling method, included sixty second year undergraduates belonging to two state universities and one private university. Both state and private universities were focused on in this study in order to show that both student communities



face consequences of the economic crisis in different ways and it is not a problem exclusive to state university students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At first glance, one could state that students attending private universities are more susceptible to dropping out of university as they attend a fee-paying university. Or one could also assume that the economic crisis does not affect the private university students since they could afford to enrol themselves in a private institution. However, it was also brought to light that though students attending state universities do not pay for the degree, they too consider the option of dropping out of university. It should be noted that while the outcome is the same, causes that affect this outcome may vary.

One of the major problems that both state and private university students face is finding their daily meals. With the (unreasonable) price hikes of grocery items and vegetables, the cost of a meal, be it a lunch packet from somewhere outside of university premises or a plate of rice from a university canteen, has become unaffordable to many. The students from the private university stated that they are in constant search of places to buy lunch close to the university which would offer them a meal at a reasonable price.

‘අතන එන තැනම හන්දියෙ පොල් අතු කඩයක් තියෙනවා මිස්. එකේ rice¹ එකක් 250යි. මන් අපේ ඔක්කොටම ගෙනත් දෙනවා මිස් නැත්තන් ආසාවට rice එකක් කන්න බැනේ’
(Loosely translated as ‘Miss, there is a small coconut-leaf roofed shop near that junction. There, the rice is 250. I bring rice for all of us from that shop otherwise we can’t afford rice’)
(Student 03, private university)

This same concern was seen among students from the state university as well. Even though the price of a plate of rice and curry in state universities is less expensive than outside, students still cannot afford it. The basic rice meal consists of rice, dhal, soya meat, and pol sambol which used to be only 15 rupees but now costs approximately 80 rupees, and the price increases with every additional curry the students decide to add to their meal, which could easily add up to 200 rupees. Hence, a large number of students opt for the basic rice meal without any additional curries, and in most cases, they eat only two meals a day in order to save money.

‘අනේ මැඩම් මට දවසට වෙල් තුනම කන්න සල්ලි නැහැ. තාත්තාගේ පඩියෙන් තමයි අපි හැමෝම ජීවත් වෙන්නේ. මට ඉස්කෝලේ යන නංගිලා දෙන්නෙක් ඉන්නවා, ඉතින් ගෙදර වියදම් වැඩියි. මම කන්නේ වෙල් දෙකයි, මැඩම්. අනිත් වෙල බඩගින්නේ ඉන්නවා. වෙන මොනවා කරන්නද, මැඩම්’
(Loosely translated as ‘Madam, I cannot afford all three meals a day. We all depend on our father’s salary. I have two sisters who are schooling, so too many expenses at home. I only have two meals per day. What else to do, madam’)
(Student 15, state university)

This evidently affects the health conditions of students as they always consume less than what their body needs, and meals which are affordable but not nutritious, causing their immunity to become weak and making them vulnerable to many illnesses. According to some students there have been instances where fellow batchmates have fainted or collapsed in classes due to the lack of proper nutrition. It was noted that a majority of the students were constantly suffering from a cold and cough which is a classic sign of low immunity. On the other hand, haemorrhoid is becoming a common illness among university students due to the absence of nutritious meals.

¹ Here, rice means fried rice.



“මැඩම්, ඩොක්ටර් කීව්වා මට නියෙන්නේ අර්ශස් කියලා. එලවළු පලතුරු කන්න කීව්වා. අනේ කොහොමද මැඩම් ඕවා කන්නේ? සල්ලි කොහෙද ඕවට, මැඩම්”
(Loosely translated as ‘Madam, the doctor said I have hemorrhoids. He asked me to eat fruits and vegetables. How to eat those, madam? How can I afford those, madam?’)
(Student 12, state university)

Apart from being burdened by the cost of food, transport cost is also a huge burden for a majority of students.

“මට ගොඩක් වෙලාවට බස් එකට එන්න සල්ලි මදි වෙනවා මිස්. මම ගිය සතියම campus ආවෙ නැ. ගෙදරින් සැරින් සැරේ ඉල්ලන්න බැනේ, මිස්. Degree එකටම ලොකු ගානක් යනවා නේ”
(Loosely translated as ‘Most of the time I don’t have enough money for the bus, miss. I didn’t come to campus the whole of last week. Can’t ask money from home all the time, miss. The degree itself costs a lot’)
(Student 31, Private university student).

This same sentiment was seen among the students from the state university as well.

“Bus වල යන්න සල්ලි නැ, මැඩම්. බොඩිමේ ඉඳලා uni එකට එන්න රුපියල් 50ක් යනවා. ආයේ බෝඩිමට යන්නත් 50ක් යනවා. ඉතින් මැඩම් ඒ එක වෙලක් කන්න නියෙන සල්ලි. මම ඉතින් ඒක ඉතුරු කරන් පයින් යනවා. එක දවසක් කල්න්නේ වගේ ආවා හවස බෝඩිමට යන්නකොට. මහන්සියටයි දවල් කාලා තිබ්බේ නැති නිසයි”
(Loosely translated as ‘I don’t have money to go by bus. It costs 50 rupees to come to the university from the boarding. To back to the boarding also it costs another 50 rupees. That’s the price of one meal. So, to save that money I walk. Once I was faintish when I got to the boarding, because I was tired and haven’t had lunch’)
(Student 45, state university)

This prevailing social issue hinders equal access to education, which is strongly advocated by social justice theory, according to which everyone is entitled to education despite their individual differences including their economic background. Education should not at any instance be a choice to any individual, which unfortunately has become the reality for many students in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Administrators, policy makers, and other authorities do not seem to even consider this an issue, perhaps because those who are affected belong to low-income family backgrounds. When reading this in the light of Marxist theories, since issues that concern the working class do not affect the upper classes and thereby the ruling class as well, the plights of the former go unseen and unheard by the latter.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATION

All our findings can be narrowed down to one particular concern; Is education still a right or a privilege? Despite whether students attend a fee levying university or not, all students face similar economic issues in varying degrees. Finding money for food and transport has become a major challenge for the students. On the other hand, while most of these students come from economically underprivileged family backgrounds, they are more often than not forced to find a source of income and support their families instead of ‘wasting’ time on education, which forces them to drop out of universities and go in search of jobs. This could have a detrimental effect on the individual as lack of education limits opportunity for upward social mobility, which in turn affect the country’s economy, growth, development, and literacy rate. Therefore, this issue cannot be overlooked as yet another effect of the economic crisis. Those in the academia, administration, and policy makers should understand the complexity of this issue at hand and bring necessary laws and policies that address and resolve this issue.



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