



NARRATIVE WATCH

Key Online Narratives Shaping
Sri Lanka's Public Discourse

This report analyses a key online narrative shaping Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape. Using trend monitoring, keyword analysis, and observations of influential pages and channels, it explores how digital conversations emerge, spread, and influence public opinion. As social media increasingly drives civic and political discourse, understanding these narratives is vital for promoting informed engagement, countering harmful content, and strengthening inclusive dialogue in Sri Lanka.

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NARRATIVE PERIOD

Jan 2026

KEY THEME

The social media discourse around the historical map of the Tamil Eelam based on the 1799 Cleghorn Minute.

BACKGROUND

A renewed social media discourse within Tamil digital spaces is centered on the Cleghorn Minute, a 1799 report by Hugh Cleghorn of the British East India Company. The document's often cited claim that "two different nations" historically inhabited distinct parts of the island, with Sinhalese in the south and west and Tamils in the north and east, has been reinterpreted and visually amplified through maps circulating online. These representations frame the report as historical validation for the concept of Tamil Eelam. However, this discourse selectively extracts a colonial-era observation and recontextualizes it within contemporary political narratives, contributing to contested interpretations of history and identity in Sri Lanka's digital information ecosystem.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The current social media discourse around the Cleghorn Minute reflects a structured narrative strategy that blends historical referencing, political legitimization, and identity reconstruction to advance a contemporary territorial claim. The map's widespread sharing with near-identical captions suggests a coordinated amplification strategy rather than organic discourse.

At its core, the discourse is anchored on the authority of Hugh Cleghorn and his 1799 account, which is framed not as a descriptive colonial observation but as foundational evidence. Captions such as "Is such a vast area of the Tamil Eelam map meant for just 12% of the population?" function as rhetorical entry points posing demographic contradictions that are then resolved by invoking the Cleghorn Minute as a hidden or overlooked truth. This establishes a narrative logic where present-day population distributions are depicted as distortions of an original, more "authentic" ethnic geography.

A key layer of this discourse is historical continuity and political lineage-building. The Cleghorn text is linked directly to post-independence Tamil nationalist milestones, particularly through C. Suntharalingam and the Vaddukoddai Resolution, as well as the electoral positioning of the Tamil United Liberation Front in 1977. By constructing this genealogy, the discourse elevates the document from a colonial report to a legitimizing artifact embedded within a longer political struggle. This framing implicitly argues that Tamil Eelam is not a modern invention, but a claim consistently grounded in historical and political precedent.



Joshua Raja Nesan

DRRBLN • 18 Jan 2026, 06:38

"தமிழீழ வரைபடத்தில் 12 சதவீதமான தமிழர்களுக்கு இவ்வளவு பெரிய இடமா? சிங்களவர்கள் பெரும்பான்மையாக வாழும் புத்தளம் மாவட்டம் கூட தமிழர்களின் இடமா?"

இவ்வாறான கேள்விகளை இன... [See more](#)



Another prominent narrative strand is the reinterpretation of demographic change through the lens of “Sinhalization.” Here, shifts in ethnic composition in regions like Puttalam, Chilaw, and Wennappuwa are not treated as organic or multi-causal, but as the outcome of a deliberate socio-political process. The identification of communities such as Karava and Bharatha as having “Tamil origins” serves to blur rigid ethnic boundaries and reclassify present identities as historically contingent or even inauthentic. This is reinforced through references to surnames as residual markers of an underlying Tamil identity, creating a quasi-anthropological argument that challenges current ethnic categorizations.

The discourse also incorporates elements of suppressed or contested knowledge, particularly the claim that parts of Cleghorn’s writings such as references to Sinhalese migration from Siam were deliberately

removed and only rediscovered later in British archives. This introduces a conspiratorial undertone, suggesting that historical truths have been intentionally obscured. Such framing strengthens in-group cohesion by positioning the audience as recipients of “recovered” or “hidden” knowledge, while casting doubt on mainstream historiography.



The discourse also asserts that the “undeniable” historical dominance of the Tamil language in areas like Chilaw and Puttalam function as discursive closure mechanisms. By presenting contested claims as settled facts, the narrative limits space for debate and reinforces a singular interpretation of history.

Taken together, this social media discourse operates as a layered narrative ecosystem, one that selectively mobilizes colonial records, post-independence political milestones, identity reinterpretations, and claims of suppressed history. Its overall effect is to transform a historically situated document into a powerful symbolic anchor for

contemporary ethno-political claims, while simultaneously reshaping perceptions of territory, identity, and legitimacy in Sri Lanka's digital public sphere.



அழகிய தமிழ் மகள்

19 Jan 2026, 07:46

“தமிழீழ வரைபடத்தில் 12% தமிழர்களுக்கு
இவ்வளவு பெரிய இடமா?

சிங்களவர்கள் பெரும்பான்மையாக வாழும்
புத்தளம் மாவட்டம் கூட தமிழர்களின் இடமா?”

இவ்வாறான கேள்விகளை இன்று நாம்... [See more](#)



POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The renewed circulation of the Cleghorn Minute of 1799 within Tamil digital spaces while demonstrating the transformative power of digital media in shaping historical understanding, also shows the continuing sensitivities in ethno-religious based politics in Sri Lanka. Despite being a country of multi ethnicities, the ideological clash between the Sinhala Buddhist majority and Tamil minority fed by political elites and sometimes by the respective religious leaders remains a concern as there is a thin and sometimes blurred margin that prevents these clashes from becoming violent.

While ethnic clashes between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities have been witnessed through decades even resulting in a civil war that lasted 30 years, ethno-religious sensitivities have formed the base of some political actors and movements whose political survival has depended either on Sinhala ultra-nationalism or Tamil ultra-nationalism. These two extremist camps have often created rifts among hardline Sinhalese and Tamils posing obstacles to post-war reconciliation efforts as well as keep the nationalist campaigns alive for political advantage, especially during key national elections.

National elections in post-war Sri Lanka have shown polarization among the communities, especially when analyzing the voting patterns of the country's predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist South and the predominantly Tamil North. Since 2005, until 2015, the country's political narrative was largely driven firstly by the agenda to end the war by defeating the LTTE and the second narrative pushed by the Sinhala-Buddhist ultra-nationalists was to unite the country by defeating what they (the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists) claimed as the separatist agenda of the Tamil nationalist camp. It was during and after the war that Sri Lanka witnessed the emergence of a Sinhala Buddhist ultra-nationalist group led by a group of southern politicians with the support of some Buddhist clergy to carve out a separate vote block that could easily be manipulated through sensitive, nationalist propaganda. However, this narrative was briefly defeated at the 2015 presidential election.

From 2015-2019, the main focus of the voters was accountability and anti-corruption. Nevertheless, shortcomings of the then administration resulted in the Sinhala Buddhist ultra-nationalist once again securing power in 2019. The focus in 2019 was once again the preservation of the Sinhala Buddhist nation and its security.

Be that as it may, the national elections in 2024 set a milestone with the ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP) winning both the presidential and parliamentary election by securing the votes, not only of the southern voter, but also of the northern and eastern voters as well. While the JVP/NPP's electoral victory in the south and north shocked the ultra-nationalist camps both in the south and north, there are currently campaigns carried out by both these camps against the incumbent government.

The Sinhala nationalists are trying to portray the President and government as being insensitive to the constitutionally guaranteed pride of place to Buddhism while disregarding the country's culture while the Tamil nationalists claim the government has failed to understand the long-standing issues of the Tamil people and that a permanent solution would not be presented to resolve issues faced by the Tamils.

Given these developments in Sri Lanka's political arena, it is evident that ethno-religious sensitivities fueled by ultra-nationalists from both the Sinhala and Tamil sides would require close monitoring online and offline, mainly to prevent these politically motivated ideological clashes from becoming violent.

Regarding the ongoing social media campaign related to the Cleghorn Minute of 1799 that was originally authored by Hugh Cleghorn, a British colonial administrator, it has become a focal point in ongoing debates about history, identity, and territorial legitimacy in Sri Lanka. Its most frequently cited claim — that “two different nations” historically inhabited the island, with Sinhalese in the south and west and Tamils in the north and east — has gained new visibility through social media, where it is often presented as evidence supporting the concept of Tamil Eelam.

In its original context, the Cleghorn Minute was not intended as a political or constitutional statement. Rather, it formed part of early British attempts to understand and administer newly acquired territories. Colonial officials frequently categorized populations in simplified terms, emphasizing differences in language, religion, and customs to make governance more manageable. Cleghorn's observation, therefore, should be understood as an administrative generalization rather than a definitive claim about nationhood or sovereignty. Nonetheless, the ambiguity of its language has made it particularly susceptible to reinterpretation.

However, the contemporary debate surrounding the Cleghorn Minute reflects deeper questions about the relationship between history and political legitimacy as well. Its ambiguity allows it to be invoked in multiple, often conflicting ways, making it a potent symbol in Sri Lanka's ongoing struggles over identity, territory, and historical memory.