

## **AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE CONCEPT OF PREJUDICE IN RELATION TO RECONCILIATION IN SRI LANKA**

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The civil war of Sri Lanka has created destructive prejudices among the ethnic groups in the island. The present author's involvement with students in various institutions of higher education has convinced him of the fact that these deep-seated harmful prejudices, as epistemic errors (wrong knowledge claims), are huge obstacles for genuine reconciliation. This awareness motivated him to undertake an epistemological inquiry into prejudice because prejudices have a direct influence on knowledge claims which lead to formation of attitudes and patterns of behaviour. There are many approaches to this issue of reconciliation in Sri Lanka. However, an epistemological approach will provide the necessary philosophical foundation for reconciliation by identifying the origin, the process and extent of genuine knowledge and prejudice. Restoration of relationships among the ethnic groups in the island, based on proper knowledge of affairs, is a must for long lasting reconciliation. For this reason, a re-evaluation of prejudices that hinders reconciliation process is the need of the hour. The Father of the modern British empiricism, John Locke (1632-1704), in his classic *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* made a substantial epistemic inquiry into knowledge and prejudice. He identifies ideas as the basic building materials of human knowledge. According to him, ideas are formed through perception and they are associated with one another through the intellectual faculties of understanding and reason. He systematically rejected the concept of innate ideas while affirming the intellectual innate capacities. The association of ideas can be of natural or of voluntary (Chance or customs). It is through the natural or right association of ideas that genuine knowledge is formed. However, through the voluntary association of ideas two fundamental states of mind are formed: dubitable state of mind (doubts, opinions and beliefs) and erroneous state of mind which is prejudice. It is through 'wrong association of ideas', that prejudices are formed. However, the irony of prejudice is that the prejudiced are not aware of their erroneous state of mind. Without doing their epistemic duty they consider prejudice as genuine knowledge and allow them to influence their attitudes and behaviour. The author strongly argues that habitual or customary violent responses to conflict can be replaced with intelligent and transforming choices. For that all involved in ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and beyond, must re-evaluate their fundamental knowledge claims and restore mutual relationships. Along with other efforts, an epistemological re-evaluation of the prevailing prejudices and preventing further formation of prejudices through proper education, are necessary. We will place the thesis in the context of post war realities in Sri Lanka. All the available literature related to the thesis will be analytically scrutinized, possible objections / critiques will be identified and research findings will be synthetically presented.

*Keywords:* Idea, Knowledge, Prejudice, Conflict and epistemology