

History of Opinion Polling in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka does not possess an entrenched tradition or a history of Opinion Polling as many other developed nations. The Department of Census and Statistics plays the dominant role as the regular survey researcher but it has a state centric origin and is being described as the central statistical agency in Sri Lanka supplying data needed for planning, policy formulation and monitor the progress of various government policies. As a result, it largely caters to the Government and its affiliated institutions. In addition, Market Researchers (despite not having a long history and an established culture), too play a significant role in Sri Lankan opinion research. However, most of their research focuses on specific requirements of their clients and are not available to the public. Sri Lankan Universities have been involved in implementing surveys on various social and political issues from time to time but due to the lack of resources most of their polling initiatives have been “ad hoc”. The paper shall strive to assess the overall status of opinion polling in Sri Lanka while also attempting to trace the early stages in coordinated social survey attempts (to address the lacunae in social research) such as the establishment of Marga Institute in 1972, to the more recent social survey agencies as Social Indicator (SI) and SPARC (Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre).

Introduction

In the absence of any proper previous literature on this topic for this paper, in the period of August-September 2005, Social Indicator embarked on an informal but an exploratory ‘survey’ of Sri Lanka’s opinion survey researchers. As the efforts progressed, it became clear that Sri Lanka does not possess an entrenched history of opinion surveys in par with many other countries – especially that of the developed world; It also was identified that the historical development took place in two stages: ‘Early’ and the ‘Contemporary’.

Early Opinion Surveys in Sri Lanka

The earliest perception survey unearthed for this conference paper in Sri Lanka was based on a household, self administered questionnaire among Catholics of all church parishes in Sri Lanka. (Thus, the first Sri Lankan scientific perception survey had religious roots). It was conducted in 1967 and 1968 and was one part census and one part perception study linked to a Catholic Church reform and renewal effort. *The results were never published* though. The survey was cited in *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka* – By Rev. Fr. François Houtart¹.

A key individual who was involved in implementing the survey on behalf of the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka was Mr. Charles Fernando, who is currently a senior lecturer of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. The second known scientific perception survey conducted in Sri Lanka incorporated more scientific design and was in line with today’s survey practices; It was conducted by Mr. Charles Fernando himself and findings were submitted by him to the Catholic University, Louvain, Belgium as his dissertation for

¹ 1974-Hansa Publishers, Sri Lanka- ISBN: B0000E9CFA.

the Licentiate in Sociology presented in June 1973. It was titled “*Buddhists and Catholics in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) – How they see each other –The use of Factor Analysis in Sociology.*”² The fieldwork was carried out during June 1970 in Colombo, Kelaniya, Matara and Negombo with a sample of 695 Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, and Protestant Christians. The response sets of Hindus, Moslems, and Protestant Christians totaling 165 were not treated. The sample consisted of students preparing to enter university, teachers (or teacher trainees) and some parents.

Mr. Fernando recounts about the analysis of the survey data: “Only the remaining 530 were treated: 272 replies of Buddhists on Catholics and 258 of Catholics on Buddhists. The analysis was carried out in two phases-the first centred on 78 items designed in the form of attitude scales and was aimed at reducing the data and led to the identification of 4 composite variables or factors. These and other variables from the survey forming a total of 34 were analysed in the second phase. Factor analysis was the preferred tool in both phases”.

The Department of Census and Statistics

Official censuses in the country began in 1871, way before the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) was established in 1947.

“Sri Lanka has a long history of census taking, beginning with the 1871 census. With few exceptions, censuses have been taken at regular intervals as recommended by the United Nations, in years ending with 1. The exceptions have been due to unavoidable circumstances, for example... the Second World War...The 1991 census was not conducted due to the unstable conditions caused by the ethnic conflict in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country. Hence, the last census was carried out in the year 2001 after a lapse of 20 years. It was not possible to cover the districts in the north and east of the country, with the exception of (Ampara district) during the 2001 census. Therefore, to that extent there are gaps in demographic data today.”³

The DCS functions as the government statistical agency, signifying the centralized statistical approach of Sri Lanka’s state sector. It is entrusted with taking of all censuses and sample surveys relating to the socio-economic conditions of the people of Sri Lanka and to this end is responsible for the collection, compilation, analysis and dissemination of the statistical data requirements of the government, as well as the provision of trained professional statistical staff to all government agencies undertaking statistical services. It functions under two ordinances -the Census Ordinance, and the Statistics Ordinance. It has 1200 staff members working in the Head Office divisions, Branch offices, statutory bodies, and in the District Secretariats called “*Kachcheris*” and also in Provincial Councils. DCS has 18 Head Office divisions, 54 Branch offices in different Ministries, Departments and Statutory bodies. It has 25 District offices located in the respective *Kachcheris*.

It should be stressed here that the DCS focuses on statistical censuses rather than public opinion surveys. The key public opinion survey agencies are discussed next. Further, it should also be noted that demographic and population statistics of DCS usually form the

² Factor analysis is a statistical technique used in the social sciences and in marketing, product management, operations research, and other applied sciences that deal with large quantities of data. The objective is to explain the most of the variability among a number of observable random variables in terms of a smaller number of unobservable random variables called factors.

³ *Country response to international data requests: The role of statistical coordination at the national level* – By Wimala Jayanthi Nigamuni, Senior Statistician, Department Of Census And Statistics, Colombo-October 2003

sampling base of public opinion surveys conducted by survey agencies mentioned henceforth.

Contemporary Scenario

“Research International (RI) is the first Sri Lankan company to pioneer contemporary opinion polling in Sri Lanka. This was done with the collaboration of Mitofsky International of USA” according to Mr. Charitha Ratwatte, founder of Colombo’s Research International (Pvt) Ltd. Mitofsky International was founded by Mr. Warren Mitofsky⁴. By Mr. Ratwatte’s own admission, RI was instituted in 1994 “for the purpose of conducting opinion polls which reveal views of the general public on matters of trade, business and society.”⁵ Currently however, RI functions as the survey research unit of Sri Lanka Business Development Council (SLBDC) which is a private, non-profit, non-stock consultancy company established in 1984⁶.

RI conducted opinion polls in 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998 the results of which had been given publicity in *The Sunday Times* newspaper published in Colombo⁷. Mr. Ratwatte adds that public opinion research is a future growth sector in Sri Lanka. Increasing media penetration is the key reason for this trend. The role of opinion polling in the country, is one of “convincing the decision makers, rather than the general public”. To this end, measuring impact (of recent socio-political developments) through such surveys is necessary. In his experience, various ministers of the government with whom he had worked, have not rejected such opinion surveys results but instead, are attentive readers of such polls.

In contrast, Mr. Jinendra Kothalawala – Research Director, AC Nielsen (Colombo), views Lankan public opinion polling as a comparatively less developed sector than its market research sector, and identifies “Lanka Market Research Bureau” and “ACNielsen” as the two leading market research firms in the country⁸. “Not many opinion surveys were conducted before LMRB began their business” he observes, and adds: “The growth in organized opinion polling is due to the growth of the market research sector”.

ACNielsen (Colombo), which claims leadership in Retail Measurement Services in the country is “purely a market research firm”, according to its Research Director, Mr. Kothalawala. It is a transformation of a partnership business that began in 1995 called “SMART”. Mr. Kothalawala cites that ACNielsen’s opinion poll on 2001 General Elections and its opinion poll on 2004 General Elections as their key public opinion polling efforts.

⁴ Mr. Mitofsky was a former president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research founded Mitofsky International (MI) in 1993 with the primary business of “conducting exit polls for major elections around the world”.

⁵ Mr. Ratwatte was a former Secretary to two key government ministries of Sri Lanka: Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Policy Formulation.

⁶ SLBDC was established with the participation of both public and private sectors to “develop, strengthen and stimulate” private sector business and industry in Sri Lanka. SLBDC was born with the backing of Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and USAID.

⁷ According to Mr. Ratwatte, revenue from RI’s opinion polling contributes only 10% towards SLBDC revenue. “Polling therefore is not a significant income generator; however, sometimes our clients need to know what the market thinks.”

⁸ “As an industry, the ‘market in market research’ too appears to be growing---this is evident from indirect indicators such as increasing recruitment ads by market research firms in the newspapers *etc*” says Mr. Kothalawala.

What could be the reason for the general lack of public interest in opinion surveys in Sri Lanka? Dr. Dushni Weerakoon, Deputy Director, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)⁹, Colombo, responds: “There is a lack of critical mass in research”. She adds: “If there is a strong culture of research present in the country, then relevant links will build automatically.”

Dr. Dushni continues: “The local academic sector is weak on research and methodology—largely due to lack of resources and incentives. Further, Sri Lankan opinion research is now led by the non-profits (NGO sector). This is proved by the fact that the bulk of reports on social issues that are available today are from the NGOs. It is also proved by the fact that in any research presentation forum, the same personalities from the same NGOs ‘keep reappearing’”.

Lack of academic research has led another senior survey researcher to exclude the academic sector altogether from Sri Lankan research culture (which albeit itself is still at an emergent stage). “Sri Lanka’s research culture is one that is primarily consisting of state agencies such as the Census and Statistics Department, the private sector market research agencies, and NGOs. Academic sector opinion survey research is inconsequential” says Mr. D.B. Wijethilleke, Consultant to Colombo’s Marga Institute which is also known as Sri Lanka Centre for Development Studies. Founded in 1972 by Dr. Gamini Corea (along with Dr. G. Goonetilleke), a Former Secretary General of UNCTAD who is also a renowned international economist, Marga Institute is considered as one of the pioneer research organizations in Sri Lanka. Marga¹⁰ alone has completed over 1400 research studies since its inception in 1972, and 200 of them are presented as monographs, according to Marga Institute Consultant Mr. Wijethilleke, who adds: “Among the key problems in survey research in Sri Lanka are lack of qualified professionals, the brain drain and lack of funds. As a result, lately, the quality of research has been falling.”

As previously seen, though the *growth* in the contemporary stage of public opinion polling in Sri Lanka is associated with its market research sector, its *birth* lies with Sri Lanka’s electoral process (Mitofsky International’s 1994 pre-election poll with Colombo’s Research International).

Mr. Neil de Silva, CEO, Survey Research Lanka, (SRL) and President, Lanka Market Research Society goes even to the extent of identifying country’s opinion polling sector as no more than ‘efforts on pre-election polling’. He says: “Opinion Research in Sri Lanka generally tends to be in the form of Pre-Election Opinion Surveys.” Though this argument is not valid in its entirety¹¹, it sums up the influence of Sri Lankan electoral process on public opinion polling sector.

Absence of a long tradition of opinion polling and instead, the predominant growth in market research tradition has led to lack of enthusiasm for opinion polls resulting in a less profitable, ‘unattractive sector’---This is worsened by the risk of the pollster being painted with political partisan tag. Further, the nature of Sri Lankan public opinion polling, in contrast to market research, appears to require higher ‘funds, resources and planning input’. SRL’s Mr. Neil de Silva: “When it comes to public opinion surveys, sampling techniques differ according to the nature of the election-survey and even the elections to be held.

⁹ <http://www.ips.lk/>- IPS was established as an autonomous *research institute* in 1988 and was formally gazetted in April 1990. By its own admission, it enjoys ‘a somewhat unique position as a think tank in Sri Lanka as it was set up by an Act of Parliament and several of its Board of Governors are ex-officio members from the Government.’ According to Dr. Dushni, IPS is the only Sri Lankan research organization with formal ties to the government.

¹⁰ <http://www.margasrilanka.org/>

¹¹ New opinion pollsters such as Social Indicator, discussed later in this paper, conduct regular polls on various social issues including the country’s Peace Process – <http://www.cpalanka.org/polling.html>

Further, quality assurance is necessary – at a level higher than market research --and use of (the most) experienced enumerators is vital.”

According to Mr. Silva, SRL has gained a reputation in Sri Lanka for its accurate pre-election opinion polls that have been conducted even in LTTE rebel held areas that are not under government control, according to Mr. de Silva. SRL gained its reputation especially after the three Sri Lankan elections held in 2000, 2001, 2004, he says¹².

Mr. Kothalawala’s view that Lankan market research firms’ are non-committal towards public opinion research is confirmed by Mr. Nihal De Silva, Deputy CEO – Lanka Market Research Bureau (LMRB)¹³. Established in 1981, LMRB introduced market research in Sri Lanka and according to Mr. de Silva, is “totally focused on consumer research”.

He states: “As a policy, LMRB avoids opinion research. This is due the political risks associated with them. Another reason is LMRB’s Mumbai based parent firm IMRB International’s policy of ‘staying away from public opinion research’. “LMRB believes that some specialized Sri Lankan institutions are conducting public opinion research and therefore finds no financial incentive in commencing such polls by itself. As a result, LMRB stays within the framework of market research while conducting a few ad hoc social research attempts such as its Study on Dolphins for the Bay of Bengal Programme¹⁴. Mr. de Silva states that LMRB’s public opinion research needs are met by its own client driven market surveys and therefore no specific public opinion are conducted” he adds.

Social Indicator (SI), the polling unit of Colombo’s non-profit think tank the Centre for Policy Alternatives¹⁵ could be identified as one such “specialized Sri Lankan institution conducting public opinion research”, as mentioned by Mr. de Silva of LMRB¹⁶.

Social Indicator (SI) operates under the Board of Directors of CPA and was established in 1999 with the assistance of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded Governance and Institutional Strengthening Project (GISP) in Sri Lanka, implemented by the Human Rights Research and Education Centre of the University of Ottawa (HRREC).

The emergence of SI from NGO sector is one reason for IPS’ Dushni Weerakoon to say that ‘Sri Lankan public opinion research is dominated by the NGO sector’¹⁷.

SI has contributed to building indicators on various social aspects such as governance and democracy (Eg: SI’s *Report Card Surveys*), the Peace Process (SI’s *The Peace Confidence Index -PCI*) etc. SI expects to truly become *the* social indicator for Sri Lanka ‘in the long run’. To this end, SI has also contributed to various local (Eg: PCI) and cross-national (Eg: *The 2004 South Asian Democratic Barometers*) studies.

¹² www.srl.lk - SRL, which introduced TV ratings to Sri Lanka has (appropriately) earned a name as “the Media Researcher” amongst research institutes in Sri Lanka.

¹³ <http://www.lmrbltd.com/index.htm>

¹⁴ A Study of Dolphin Catches in Sri Lanka (1993)– by Pauline Dayaratne & Leslie Joseph –(for Bay of Bengal Programme) LMRB was sub-contracted the socio-economic aspects of the study. The study document is available online at http://www.onefish.org/cds_upload/1049727485226_0056.pdf

¹⁵ “CPA is committed to programmes of research and advocacy through which public policy is critiqued, alternatives identified and disseminated” – www.cpalanka.org

¹⁶ “From its inception, the focus of SI has been to communicate public perceptions on socio-economic and political issues rather than the preferences of political parties or personalities” – www.cpalanka.org/polling.html

¹⁷ Ibid

SI is the only opinion pollster in the country to conduct a regular public opinion survey on the Sri Lanka Peace Process. The “Peace Confidence Index (PCI)” is a study gauging the level of public confidence in the peace process in Sri Lanka over a period of time. It is one of a kind of opinion polling in the country spanning a period of four years –it commenced in May 2001 and to-date, completed 19 waves. Currently the survey is conducted once in three months.

What is significant to note is that as the peace talks continued, the Social Indicator’s PCI had been increasingly referenced in many instances locally and internationally, implying its probable acceptance as the “Yardstick of Peace Research” from Sri Lanka.

SI’s contribution also extends to the political discourse of the country. When SI began in 1999, opinion polling was given minimal or no coverage by the local media and were rarely mentioned in the political discourse. However, SI surveys appear to have made an impact as their coverage by media gradually increased in SI’s 6 years of operations. SI’s opinion polls received prompt and wider coverage in both print and electronic media in Sinhala, Tamil and English languages. What is significant to note is that SI’s surveys have been often quoted by politicians and policymakers locally and internationally. For instance, during the first session of peace talks between LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka in September 2002 at Sattahip Naval Base, Thailand, Mr. Vidar Helgesen, State Secretary, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressing the inaugural session referred to PCI’s findings: “Recent opinion polls indicate that more than 80% of the population shares the parties’ desire to find a negotiated solution to the conflict¹⁸,”

However, as acceptance for opinion polling grew, the ever increasing public appetite for opinion polls too grew and the local politicians began to draw advantage from the new trend. For instance, the recently concluded 2005 Presidential Elections is a good example where fake TV opinion polls attempted to influence the public and brought disrepute to the professional opinion pollsters. During the campaign, both the private and public TV stations backed each of their own candidates and to substantiate their ‘winning’ claims, used mobile phone SMS to conduct ‘opinion polling’ that were methodologically faulty. As a result of their fake SMS polling, both government and private TV stations were able to ‘predict’ that ‘their candidate’ as the winner in the forthcoming elections. This practice ultimately cost the reputation of professional survey researchers of the country whose hard earned standing was a result of years of research experience.

Methodological Issues & Challenges

While developed countries are transforming face to face interviews towards cost effective telephone interviews such as CATI, Sri Lankan pollsters are primarily focused on expensive and time consuming ‘field work’ to collect data. Use of CATI exists with local market research agencies –however, , according to Mr. Kothalawala of ACNielsen, CATI based studies/interviews average only two per year per market survey agency and that too is not conducted with the population in general but the ‘urban, high-end income group’.

Unavailability of the census data and electoral lists has made pollsters’ work more difficult and even expensive. The political climate created by the ethnic conflict has set a number of methodological challenges. However, pollsters are provided with the information of the smallest administrative unit called the Grama Sevaka Division that comprises about three hundred families on average.

As a result of two decades’ of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, “the Government of Sri Lanka

¹⁸ <http://www.norway.lk/peace/peace/peace/peace.htm>

does not exercise effective control of the civil administration in many sections of the north (of the country), where the LTTE operates openly”¹⁹. Therefore, scientific surveys have become impossible in these ‘LTTE held’ areas. On the one hand lack of a proper sample frame and logistical nightmares obstruct the researcher’s access to these areas while on the other, people within these areas do not have the political freedom as the rest of the country. Pollsters argue that respondents in these areas therefore cannot articulate their opinions freely particularly on the issues that are politically and ethnically sensitive. Even in areas that are not under LTTE control but which lies close to it, the situation is often fragile. Sudden political unrest in these areas compel the pollster to compromise the sampling in order to safeguard quality.

This political climate compels the survey designers to tailor special methodologies sensitive to a conflict ridden society. The need for conflict sensitivity when designing the questionnaire (Eg: A legitimate question may be socially desirable for one community while it may not be socially undesirable for another community) when conducting interviews, recruiting the enumerators, at field staff briefings and more importantly, reporting of results, are part and parcel of such tailored methodologies.

Finally, an obvious challenge for public opinion researchers in Sri Lanka is the lack of funding. As public opinion polling is *still* not an item in the day to day life of average Sri Lankan, it is not of public and commercial appeal and unless (at minimum) some voluntary funding is available (mostly non-commercial, such as grants), the public opinion pollster may need to wait till the next ‘project’ to ‘happen’.

The authors of this paper have observed an increasing popularity of opinion polling in Sri Lanka during the last decade and believe that the trend will continue. They also believe that such an increasing acceptance will expand the space for the Sri Lankan citizen – especially marginalized communities- to voice their concerns that matters in their day to day lives.

¹⁹ US Department of state: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1025.html