

IN A LUSH, TORMENTED LAND

Eqbal Ahmad

On the world map the diamond-shaped island occupies a memorable space. A mere 29 miles off the southeastern coast of India, Sri Lanka lies like a pearl on the Indian Ocean. "You might also see it as a tear drop," a young Literature professor says ironically. The climate, tropical the year round, encourages ease. An air of indolence prevails even among the highrises and bustling streets of Colombo, the capital city. It is a lush country. Deep green plants grow leafy in the smallest of open spaces; creepers climb up the very distinctive architecture of Sri Lankan homes. The island's 18 million inhabitants must be among the world's gentlest peoples. Make a request, ask for a favour, and your interlocutor's head shall move like a classical Indian dancer's-right to left, left to right. Invariably the ubiquitous Sri Lankan smile shall remove potential misunderstanding: this is a gesture of compliance. During a week-long visit, I did not witness a single scuffle, not even a lone altercation.

If standard indicators are taken into account, Sri Lanka appears poised for economic take-off. Its population is 85% literate. Women are not behind walls and veils, and make up with men a nearly equal part of the work force. The infrastructure is adequate and well maintained. In seven days I witnessed no power failure nor load shedding. City transportation is inadequate. The lines at Colombo bus stops were long, and private cars clogged the streets. The welfare system-unique in South Asia-has declined from government cut-backs. Its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, at mid-point on the oceanic east-west highway, gave Sri Lanka meaningful and millennial exposures to world civilizations, and today renders it an attractive platform for world trade. At around 6.5% annually, economic growth has been respectable in the last decade but has not matched Sri Lanka's high promise. "The Tamil Tigers have prevented us from becoming an Asian tiger," remarked a young journalist.

For a decade and a half this gentle country has been at war with itself, a multi-dimensional war of ethnicity and class, north and south, and state and society. An estimated 100,000 people have been killed. Thousands, perhaps 50,000 persons have "disappeared." I say perhaps because three government appointed commissions have not yet revealed any figures. Torture and other human rights violations have occurred on a large enough scale for Sri Lanka to have kept for a decade a place on Amnesty International's list of top violators. The conflict is in the north and eastern regions, between the Sinhalese-dominated government and its armed Tamil adversary, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While life in Colombo and the thickly populated western and southern areas of the country appears surprisingly normal, the two adversaries remain locked in a deadly war of attrition. To this visitor, Sri Lanka's contrasting realities presented a paradigm of the pathologies of nationalist ideologies and post-colonial power.

Commonly, the civil war's roots are identified in the ethnic diversity of Sri Lanka. According to the 1981 census, the Sinhalese, of whom 90% are Buddhist, constitute 74% of the total population. Tamils, who are Hindus and have inhabited the island since before the Christian era, are 12.6%. Muslims are 7.1%. Others, such as the Burghers and Malays, make up a mere 0.7%. There is an additional population of Tamil immigrants, some 5.6%, who came from India to work in the tea plantations. Their Ceylon Workers Congress, led by the veteran labour leader S. Thondaman, himself a Tamil of Indian origin, is politically powerful as it controls a large vote bank. But it has remained aloof from the ethnic conflict. No census has been held since 1981; such delays are common, and usually do no good, in ethnically diverse third world countries.

The effects of this demographic diversity are accentuated by uneven geographical and economic distribution. At 12.6% of the population, Tamils are concentrated in the northern Jaffna peninsula. They also have significant presence in the eastern region: 33.8% in the Trincomalee district, 70.8% in Batticaloa; and 20.1% in Amparai. Predictably, the Jaffna peninsula, Trincomalee and Batticaloa are the primary sites of insurgency and counter-insurgency. The Muslims, also known in Sri Lanka as Moors, are spread out with some concentration in the eastern districts. They question the claims of Tamil separatism in that region; as such their relations with the LTTE tends to be adversarial. During my stay in Sri Lanka, a Muslim MP, Mohammed Mahroof, was killed, presumably by the LTTE. A week earlier, it had shot dead a Tamil MP, belonging to the TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front), a moderate and somewhat elite Tamil party supportive of the governing coalition. Both incidents revealed dimensions other than ethnic in this conflict.

Ethnic diversity alone is rarely a cause of social conflict unless it is reinforced, significantly and over time, by economic and political factors. In Sri Lanka, patterns of uneven economic growth coincide with its ethnic map. The northern and eastern regions are poorer and less developed than the western. Discontent has found an expression in Tamil nationalism. The southern areas which have also suffered from relative underdevelopment are predominantly Sinhalese. Yet, they too have been sites of major revolts. In 1971, the uprising by the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) was the product of a link-up of economic grievances with leftist militancy. This uprising shook the state to its foundations. In a remarkable demonstration of elite solidarity, the governments of Pakistan and India, which were then militarily confronting each other over the East Pakistan (Bangladesh) question, aided Sri Lanka's beleaguered government. In 1987, the JVP led another violent campaign to oppose India's military intervention and the concessions Sri Lanka's government was offering the Tamils. So where ethnicity coincided with economic discontent it contributed to separatism; and where the ethnic factor was absent it yielded radical or revolutionary violence.

The deeper roots of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka may lie in the colonial encounter and the nationalist ideologies it spawned. More specifically, it is attributable to Sinhala nationalism, and post-colonial state policies which issued from it. Even in outline, the recent history of this island country reveals a paradigm of the interplay of colonialism, nationalism, and post-colonial statehood which defines also the course taken by India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 19th and 20th centuries. As elsewhere, the establishment of colonial rule signified in Sri Lanka the decline of native power, itself the result of a civilizational failure to forge and keep abreast with the new knowledge that was burgeoning through the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Colonial discourse devalued here too local culture and history, and assigned to the natives an inferior collective identity on the basis of race, religion, and culture. Nationalism, as an ideology of difference, domination and communal solidarity, was a weapon of the colonizer.

The colonized confronted colonialism reactively—by appropriating its ideological weapons, methods and values. Often, the seeds of internal division and discord were intrinsic to this mode of appropriation. Scholars trace the roots of Sinhala nationalism to the 1880s, in the work of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) and such fellow nationalists as the novelist Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946) and the dramatist John de Silva (1857-1922). As a reaction to the perceived decline of Sinhala civilization, their's was a revivalist agenda. In response to the colonizer's orientalist devaluation of their culture and religion, they extolled the virtues and superiority of Buddhist values and culture. As a means to establish the uniqueness of Sinhala collective identity, they began to emphasize its differences with the Other-Englishmen, Burghers, Dutch, Muslims and Tamils. "The revivalist movement," writes Sarah Amunugama, a Sinhala intellectual and politician, "identified not only the Englishman but also Tamils and Muslims as 'foreigners' and as authors of their misfortune." The parallel with the writings of such formative figures in Indian nationalism as Sir Aurobindo Ghosh and Balgangadhar Tilak is striking.

As in India with Hindu nationalism, in Sri Lanka Sinhala nationalism co-existed for a time within the broader rubric of Ceylonese nationalism incorporating within itself Tamil and other elements. The exigencies of the anti-colonial struggle yielded a merger of two nationalist strains resulting in a duality of discourse, and a split ideological personality exclusionary and integrative, Sinhala and Ceylonese. Tensions existed, conflicts arose between Tamil and Sinhalese elements but they remained manageable. Some time after decolonization, there occurred, one might say, an unveiling of truth: the facade of Ceylonese nationalism gave in to the reality of overt Sinhala domination. The process climaxed in the "1956 revolution" led by the populist politician S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, father of Chandrika Kumaratunga, the current President of Sri Lanka.

From a sense of opportunity more than belief, he undertook to render Dharmapala's Sinhala revivalist agenda into state policy. Sinhala communalism become in effect the state ideology. As was Urdu in Pakistan (including Bengali-speaking East Pakistan), Sinhala was declared the sole official language, a measure that would adversely affect the Tamil middle and educated class, and also the English-

educated Sinhalese who had formed the back-bone of the liberal strain in Ceylonese nationalism. Buddhist religious and cultural symbols were propagated as national emblems. To make matters worse, these policies coincided with the exponential expansion of the state, a process in which Tamils felt discriminated. Prime Minister Bandaranayake was assassinated in September 1959, ironically by Sinhala radicals who deemed his Sinhalization measures inadequate and slow. His wife Sirima succeeded him.

Tamil nationalist sentiment began to radicalize during this period. As successive governments failed to develop a consensual and inclusive system of governance, radicalism gained ground gradually. Yet it was not until 1977 that the LTTE carried out its first assassination, of Alfred Duraiappa, mayor of Jaffna. On July 13, 1983, when it carried out its first ambush, killing 13 Sinhala soldiers, the LTTE had only 32 fighters. What followed, was a tragedy and crime of historic import. On July 23, Sinhala mobs carried out pogroms against Tamil communities in the western regions especially Colombo. Sinhala and Tamil intellectuals and human rights advocates say that President J. R. Jayawardene's government and party leaders encouraged the rioting and massacres. Thousands of educated middle-class Tamils left the country. The state failed to act forcefully. The LTTE is said to have swollen within weeks to a thousand fighters. Civil war began then and continues still in the lush, tormented land.

Sri Lanka's War: Is the End in Sight?

In a decade and half of ethnic warfare, the prospect for peace had never seemed better than in November 1994 when Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected president with an unprecedented 62% of the vote. A left of centre politician of progressive outlook, she had appeared serious about making peace, and to get there she seemed willing to walk half-way. She is reported to have made preliminary contacts with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) prior to her election. A ceasefire came into effect soon thereafter. It lasted 103 days. On April 19, 1995, the Tigers broke it without notice or explanation when they sank a ship in Trincomalee harbour and, a week later, shot down two Sri Lanka Air Force Avro Jets. War resumed.

President Kumaratunga has pursued war more vigorously than she could pursue peace. For nearly two years, Sri Lanka's army has been on the offensive and, in conventional terms, it has been winning. It now holds Jaffna and most towns in the peninsula and eastern regions. The LTTE, not quite on the run, has nevertheless been deprived of the territorial control it had exercised for more than a decade. Yet it remains a lethal organization, disciplined, tightly organized, and capable of striking hard blows as it did recently with the dramatic assassinations of two parliamentarians-Arunachelam Thangathurai, a Tamil, and Mohammed Maharoof, a Muslim. The LTTE has not lost, and the government cannot quite win the war. In this sort of warfare, the guerrillas often win when they do not lose, and the government loses if it does not win politically, that is, if it does not accommodate the aspirations behind an insurgency.

My acquaintance with the Sri Lankan conflict is barely a month old. My knowledge is limited and information is incomplete. Hence my assessment is necessarily tentative. In sum it is this. One, the two sides in the Sri Lankan conflict have reached an unproductive stalemate which cannot be broken by military means; politics gain absolute primacy in such situations and the sooner the two sides find common ground for a settlement the better for Tamil and Sinhala peoples of the island country. Two, the responsibility and initiative for seeking a political settlement lies with the government more than with the LTTE. Three, the LTTE leaders will be wise to study the historic junctures in which lack of flexibility has caused highly organized and disciplined movements, not quite to be defeated, but to dwindle over time. Four, government leaders need always remind themselves that, while the fortunes of an armed movement may fluctuate, the grievances it has articulated remain to haunt both state and society.

The government's material gains have been considerable in the last two years. The LTTE's losses have been proportional to the government's gains. The LTTE had three sources of funding India, Sri Lanka Tamils abroad, many of whom had emigrated after the 1983 riots, and revenue from taxes collected in rebel-controlled areas, especially in Jaffna. Some observers also ascribe control of coastal smuggling as a source of income. All but one of these sources of funding have been reduced to a trickle; only the expatriate contributions remain. Indian aid virtually ended in July 1987 when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi signed an accord with the government of Sri Lanka that resulted in Indian military intervention against the LTTE, and the revenge assassination of Rajiv Gandhi on May 21, 1991 by an LTTE woman suicide bomber.

In Jaffna peninsula where the LTTE controlled a quasi-state, it had developed an elaborate and efficient system of collecting vehicle, entry-exit, octroi and import-export taxes. Today the government holds Jaffna city and administers an estimated 430,000 of the peninsula's population. The LTTE has direct control over areas with some 150,000 people. As most armed movements do, it too must be able still to make collections in government-held areas but it has undoubtedly lost its most lucrative source of funding. Similarly in the eastern districts, the LTTE's political and military presence remains significant but observers believe that the organizational links between the north and east have been weakened.

Journalists and scholars I spoke to say that time has taken its toll of LTTE numbers also. At the high point, it had some 14,000 armed fighters. Today the estimates range around 8000-8500, of which about 7000 on the northern mainland is not a negligible guerrilla force. In fact, a motivated guerrilla force of this size, if it is reasonably armed and enjoys popular sympathy, can tie down an army of 150,000. Sri Lanka government's forces in combat zones are not quite half that size and its soldiers are coddled like cubs in a zoo. LTTE's more serious military problem may be the migration of Sri Lankan Tamils from the north and east which inevitably reduces their recruitment pool. Some half a million people, at least half of them youth, are estimated to have left the Tamil-dominated regions in the last decade. There is evidence to suggest that the number of young people between 14-16 and of women in LTTE

ranks has been increasing. It is notable that I did not hear reports of any significant increase in defections.

Even cumulatively, these are not decisive indicators. Politically vital and organizationally dynamic armed movements have sustained themselves in worse circumstances and gone on to achieve their objectives. Algeria and Cuba are historic examples. For, political not military factors are ultimately decisive in revolutionary warfare. It is in this area that lay the crucial weaknesses of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its constituent parts. They were militarized. Fighting, killing and dying took precedence over the harder tasks of educating, organizing and administering viable political communities. Politics became with them a function of power; patronage and philanthropy were confused with the creation of parallel hierarchies a network of services which renders the state useless to the people. Strategic thought and planning surrendered to tactical instincts. Invariably, militarism promotes triumphalism; one ceases to calculate risks and losses until, that is, things have gone too far.

From talking with knowledgeable persons in Sri Lanka and from reading what little is available on the LTTE, I learned very little about the linkages it has made between ideology and organization, political and military activities and structures, between administration and armed fighting, and between consent and coercion. It has developed an obviously effective and hardy military organization, an infrastructure of collecting taxes and insuring security, and a cadre of fighters that is motivated and brave. These are strengths that serve well when things are going well and the adversary does not measure up. These are not sufficient for sustaining a movement through long, lean times. But even if the LTTE is politically deficient-my evidence in this regard is inconclusive one political factor remains favourable to it and its smaller ancillaries, and that is the alienation of Sri Lankan Tamils from the state and the sectarian forces which are identified with it. To overcome this alienation is Sri Lanka's primary challenge.

The government of Chandrika Kumaratunga appears at the same time to be committed and unable to take the necessary steps toward it. As elsewhere in South Asia, the Sri Lankan state is much too centralized to serve the common good. Centralized states are uniquely unsuited to pluralistic societies. They are ideal instruments of special interests and prone as such to alienate those with lesser access to the state apparatus. Devolution of power is essential to insuring a sense of empowerment and citizens' participation. Thoughtfully designed plans of decentralization are essential to defusing social conflicts and political deterioration which invariably result from centralized power, especially in heterogeneous countries. Typically, as in Pakistan with the creation in 1955 of the One Unit structure, ruling elites respond to political pressure for power distribution with greater centralization. This is precisely what J. R. Jayewardene did in 1982 when, by a referendum, he changed Sri Lanka's parliamentary political system into an even more centralized presidential one. Predictably, the simmering ethnic discontent was vastly accentuated.

Chandrika Kumaratunga is publicly committed to reversing this legacy. In January 1996, her government released the "Draft Provisions of the Constitution Containing the Proposals of the Government of Sri Lanka Relating to Devolution of Power." Space does not permit an analysis of this not-quite-complete draft. However, one might note that it reveals the constraints under which her government currently functions. The January draft appears to weaken the provisions of regional autonomy contained in an earlier draft of which some provisions were made public piecemeal beginning in August 1995. It not only retains but also fortifies Buddhism's exalted constitutional status which makes Sri Lanka a pseudo-theocracy like Pakistan. The checks on the central government's power to intervene in regional governance appear seriously inadequate. In brief, the draft bows far too much to majoritarian preferences to truly appeal to a deeply alienated minority.

The inadequacies of the devolution proposal reflect perhaps the difficulties Kumaratunga faces vis-a-vis the Buddhist religious

establishment and her parliamentary opposition. The religious establishment has a powerful presence among the Sinhala majority people. Its antipathy to Tamils and Hinduism is as rooted as are its links with Sinhala nationalism. Furthermore, the President commands but a thin majority in Parliament. Despite the ambiguities and defects of the devolution proposal, the referendum on constitutional reforms may not win majority approval. It will certainly be opposed and rejected by Vellupilai Parbhakaran, the hard-line leader of the LTTE.

So an end to ethnic warfare in Sri Lanka is not yet in sight. Not in sight also is the emergence of a Tamil Eelam on the island. The prospects are for continued violence probably at a lower level of intensity than it had been in the last decade. It is likely that economic forces rather than political wisdom will eventually bring Sri Lanka to peace with itself. ■

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WHO ARE THE TAMILS ?

Pradeep Jaganathan

What a question. Don't be alarmed. I'm not going to really answer that question here; I can't. I don't quite know who the Tamils are — it seems to me that the question itself is both too complex and too compact for comprehensive answer. But then there are confident and clear answers to this question, that come up in particular contexts. In this article, I want to think about one of these answers questioning it as I do.

My examples come from CyberSpace, that new medium of representation that has grown in leaps and bounds over the last few years, and that is both enabled by, and helps fashion new social networks that link together, far more easily and tightly than before. Tamils who are scattered around the globe.

From a socio-historical stand point there have been two important moments in the formation of the Tamil diaspora. First, the great movement of indentured labour, many of them Tamils, from British India into places like Fiji, South Africa and Sri Lanka that began more than a hundred years ago. The second migration comes far later, in the early 1980s out of Sri Lanka. First a trickle fleeing draconian and racist laws, that become a flood after massive state condoned anti-Tamil violence of July 1983; Tamils from Sri Lanka left in the hundreds of thousands, first to South India, but also over the years to Europe, Canada and Australia and the US. There are now, it is estimated, 500,00 to 750,000 Sri Lankan Tamils in diasporic situations.

The electronic networks of CyberSpace then become, in this kind of context, very real social networks as well; these linkages have new valence. Of course, very few members of this new Tamil diaspora

have access to these technologies, which are not by any means, as easy or cheap to 'buy' or 'read' as a plain old newspaper. Nevertheless access to electronic networks, in the West as well as in Sri Lanka, grows exponentially, and therefore must be taken seriously.

The easiest way to get 'on' to Tamil 'things' in Cyber Space is to join a listserv — an electronic mailing list that can be read and replied to. The largest one around is, 'Tamil-Circle' or 'Circle' for short. If you are on Circle you get a compendium of the days e-mails from members, individual or institutional, all clipped together as it were, late at night everyday. On occasion there are discussions, about Sri Lanka, Eelam the 'proposed Tamil homeland' or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant group. Once, I tried to join these discussions, and pointed out that no one ever questioned the LTTE on 'Circle.' No one ever criticized them, I wrote, there was never a dissenting voice. I noted that this was a general feature of Sri Lankan Tamil discourses and wondered aloud if it didn't say something about the LTTE, which is, of course, an authoritative voice in these discourses. I suggested, even, that this was perhaps indicative of a certain fascist tendency in the LTTE.

My remarks were not censored; someone replied, but missing the point defended the LTTE'S right to bear arms. I replied in turn, but soon came another voice, which pointed to this exchange itself as a problem. 'Tamils' he said, should not argue among each other, for they are 'Tamils' and they must be united as 'Tamils.' The discussion despite my best efforts, died quickly.

"Who," I wondered then as I do now, "are the Tamils?" I have been in the last year, silent on circle, but I have learnt a little about a