

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

particular answer to that question by reading Circle everyday and thinking through its evolution over that time. Let me explain and expand. Much of Circle is not taken up by discussions, which are in fact quite rare. Rather, much of Circle is 'news.' It used to be that news came from the usual electronic sources, Reuters or AFP, sent in by members, or an organizer. Another 'news' source was also frequent—ad it was an interesting one. The dateline of its bulletins would read "LTTE Headquarters, Tamil Eelam" and the 'press release' itself would bear the stamp of the "LTTE International Secretariat, 21 Katherine Road, London." Very recently, there has been a marked shift. Daily news comes now almost exclusively from something called Tamilnet. there seems to be no daily news from AP or AFP any more, and fewer press releases from the LTTE. (The astute reader will note that the LTTE has recently been proscribed in the US.) But Circle goes on, and is quite saturated with daily news stories from Tamilnet, which works like a new agency. At the end of each story—and there may be five a day, with different times on the dateline—the reader is prompted to click onto its web site for the longer version of the story.

At the top of the web page, www.tamilnet.com is the caption "TamilNet" and beside it the slogan "Reporting to the world on Tamil Affairs." There is then a clear argument about the aims of the site—it seeks to present "Tamil Affairs"; "Who," I wondered to myself again, are the "Tamils?" and what might their affairs be like?

Let me consider this question with recourse to a few example from the site. This was the main story of the day, on the 3rd of November.

Last update: November 03, 1997, GMT: 16: 03 News In Brief [TamilNet, november 03, 1991] The Liberation Tigers ambushed a Sri Lankan military vehicle in the North and the Sri Lankan security forces in the Jaffna town went on full alert after an attack on the Jaffna Prison.

This story is, simply, about the LTTE. So much so that there is a clear link made between the doings of the "Liberation Tigers" and what might be called "Tamil Affairs." This link is foregrounded even more strongly in another news story featured on the site that day.

03.11.97 GMT: 11:52. SLAF Bombed Abandoned Ship - Paper The Voice of Tigers, the official radio of the LTTE, quoting Eelanatham, the Tamil daily published in the Vanni, announced this morning that the vessel which the Sri Lankan air force hit and sunk yesterday was a cargo ship that lay abandoned off the Mullathivu coast for some time.

Here that argument is even extended further: not only are the doing of the LTTE the affairs of the Tamils, but the LTTE itself is the sole source of news about itself. I find the representative logic here quite remarkable, as have others.

In a careful and rigorous argument, Ram Manikkalingam (1992) has named and dissected one of the central assumptions at work in these two stories. "The Tigers," he writes, "claim to be the sole representatives of the Tamil people" (1992:11). He goes on to argue that such

claims, if to be taken seriously, must satisfy rigorous political criteria, and the Tigers, he writes: "clearly... do not satisfy any of the moral and political criteria necessary to qualify them as the sole representatives of the Tamil people (1992:12). "Manikkalingam's most powerful argument is this: the LTTE has eliminated, through armed actions over the last decade and more, every other militant group that has sought to operate in its sphere of activity. It is, he argues, and I am in complete agreement with Manikkalingam, a telling indictment of the moral and therefore political illegitimacy of the LTTE, to be the sole representatives of the Tamils. But note that for this argument to hold, additional or external evidence of these armed actions must be presented. Now this certainly can be done, and Manikkalingam himself points to such evidence.

In my argument here, however, I wish to take a different track. I wish to examine an answer to the question, "who are the Tamils?" provided in www.tamilnet.com, from within its own logic. So I will bracket the question of the moral and political illegitimacy of the LTTE to be the sole representatives of the "Tamils." Let us assume, only for the sake of an argument, that they have earned, in some way, that right. If this is conceded, how does the website answer the question "who are the Tamils?"

To do this I shall take another route into the representative logic of the web site, addressing and seeking to examine an implicit logic in its own classification of Tamils. In other words, I ask, "how does Tamilnet represent 'other' Tamils, Tamils, that is to say, who do not live in the North-East of Sri Lanka.

I build here on an important argument made by Qadri Ismail (n.d.), that addresses the logic of inclusion and exclusion in key texts that address (Sri Lankan) Tamilness. Consider, Ismail suggests, the logical distinction apparent in texts such as the Vadukkodai Resolution of 1976, one of the classic texts of separatist Tamil nationalism. This document is of great symbolic import for it stands, as it were, as a Tamil 'declaration of independence.' The logic of the text, Ismail argues, depends upon a crucial distinction made between the Tamils of the North-East of Sri Lanka, who live within the proposed homeland, Eelam, and the Tamils of the South of Sri Lanka who live outside it. Subsequent documents, such as the Thimpu Declaration, prepared by Tamil parties for a peace conference held in Bhutan in 1986, rely on this distinction, but with an additional twist. Southern Tamils are no longer seen to be automatic future citizens of Tamil Eelam, rather it is implied that these Tamils will remain in Sri Lanka, or the south, while Tamils resident in the North-East will be citizens of the new, proposed state.

How does this relate to the text before us, www.tamilnet.com? Let me take an example, from Tamilnet, of the representation of non-North-east tamils, from the island of Sri Lanka. A news item on 30th Oct., states that:

Sterilization is being used to reduce Tamil population. A major program to systematically and radically reduce the Tamil population in Sri Lanka's plantation sector is secretly but effectively being carried out with state assistance and misdirected foreign aid. The Tamils in the hills of Sri Lanka where most of its tea and rubber grow

are being subjected to large scale sterilization which contravenes customary rules and law elsewhere in the island.

An undoubtedly serious charge, which provides, as all such stories do, an important moral legitimization of news stories of the first sort, where the LTTE is seen fighting for a new state. But surely such moral positioning must ring hollow when we realize that these very Tamils, so valuable here as news fodder are not really thought of as citizens of the proposed state of Eelam. But their very location, that is to say their very availability to stories like this make them the moral condition of possibility of LTTE politics. That moral posturing, however, is premised on a profound exclusion, and that is worth pausing over.

And who are these Tamils who are being sterilized? What are they like? Let me read a passage from the news story, which is a quote from an unnamed source.

"Somewhere in the central hills in Sri Lanka, in a tea plantation shrouded in mist, some twenty five poor Tamil plantation workers in their early twenties were herded into a dirty lorry which is normally used to transport manure for the tea saplings." "They don't seem to be aware of what is awaiting them. The only thing that clogged their minds was the Rs. 500/ the doctor mahathaya has promised them at the end of the treatment. Each had their own plan for the 500 rupee reward. Perhaps their next few meals seemed sure".

Is it not also telling, that these 'Tamils' are portrayed as 'helpless' in a particular and demeaning way. Their "minds" are "clogged" with the thought of a pittance, we are told, their bodies ready to be exchanged for a coin. One hears, faintly at first, and then with growing clarity, the echo of the ideology of colonial indenture, reverberating with the epithet "coolie."

Let us go on. What of the Tamils of the new diaspora, who live in places like Canada, Norway or the US. After all, as I suggested before, a website can be linked, quite intimately, to global social networks. Let us take as an example yet another news story, from the 27th of Oct.

Over a thousand Tamil people demonstrated in Edinburgh on Saturday during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM), which was attended by the Sri Lankan President. Tamil cultural shows were given at a custom built marquee and a vigil was held outside the conference centre.

I am struck by the activity of these Tamils, when contrasted with 'tamil plantation workers.' These Tamils are out in numbers doing things, note also that a 'Tamil cultural show.' is mentioned: these are, in other words, Tamils as Tamils. They need no other qualification. But we are never told, and this is a lengthly news story, what precisely is being demonstrated for or against. There are colorful descriptions of a march that was 'led by traditional Tamil and Scottish pipers' but what is was in aid of is not explicit. Undoubtedly, they were Tamils being Tamil and that is enough to know. The politics of this event, is then thought to be obvious, so obvious that

it does not have to be recounted. My own questions about that politics stopped at this sentence tucked into the description: "The demonstrators carried placards and red balloons bearing the LTTE logo." Things begin to get clearer.

What we have here is Manikkalingam's sole representative logic, in a slightly different form. First, it is not the LTTE as such that claims to represent these Tamils. No, the matter is more complex, the claim far more sophisticated. It is the people themselves, the 'Tamils' who make this claim, that the LTTE represents them. Hence the placards and balloons with the LTTE logo. Interestingly, such activity is always reported on in the Western diasporic context, not in the context of Southern Sri Lanka where Tamils exist as the helpless fodder of the Sri Lankan state. And yet, different from the North-East Tamils, who are actively represented by the LTTE, fought for in fact, in many news stories. Here then is one answer to the question I've been asking "who are the Tamils?" Tamilnet, represents them in these different ways, with this logic.

But there is another answer to this question which is hidden from view, tucked away so deep that it might be invisible. That is this: no one seems to question, disagree or differ with the LTTE. That is to say, there are no Tamils, whose affairs are reported on in Tamilnet, that have differences with the LTTE. On the contrary, consent to LTTE ideology is a defining feature of Tamilnet, and its representation of Tamilness.

I think back to the question I asked on Circle months ago. Why not one dissent? Even if the LTTE represents you, and the LTTE is your sole representative why would you not, even fleetingly, question it? I asked then and I was answered; the gist of the message was this—'Tamils shouldn't argue; they mustn't disagree among themselves.' And increasingly over the months, even as news on Circle has been saturated by reports from Tamilnet the very possibility of such questioning have been foreclosed even further. Now, in very sophisticated ways, the very ground of Circle is controlled by Tamilnet, which in itself has a particular, and peculiar answer to the question, "who are the Tamils?"

But I, as I did then, wish to question that answer. I wish to be counted as one of those Tamils who is not represented by the LTTE, in any shape or from, for I see it as a morally and politically illegitimate organization. I want to try against the odds, in other words, to expand the answer to the question—'who are the Tamils?'—to include those like myself, who dissent.

Reference

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