

# The Evolution of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

Arul S. Aruliah and Anusha Aruliah

*We can chart our future clearly and wisely only when we know the path which has led to the present.*

— Adlai Stevenson.

## Introduction

Ethnic conflict in the world today is a familiar situation. History is integral to understanding the ethnopolitics of any nation. Such is the case in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is an island nation located off the southern tip of India's coastline. Its history has been as varied as the many names it has had, among them Tamaraparani, Taprobane, Lanka, Ilam, Serendib, Ceylon and, in 1972, Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese (mostly Buddhist) constitute approximately 74 percent of the population; the Tamils (mostly Hindu) are approximately 18 percent (1981 census); and Tamil-speaking Muslims constitute 7 percent of the population. Other minorities include *Burghers*<sup>1</sup> and Malays. Islam was introduced to Ceylon by Arab traders around the eighth century A.D. The Portuguese introduced Catholicism in 1505. In 1638, the Portuguese were replaced by the Dutch, who were subsequently overthrown by the British (1796) in their quest to expand the British Empire. The British were a different type of invader. Their policies left a lasting impact on Sri Lanka in a way that had never occurred before. Historian D.C. Mendis suggested that:

[the] Portuguese [had] left behind the Roman Catholic Church, and the Dutch their system of law. The British administrative system, helped by the great changes brought about by the modern industrial civilization, helped Ceylon to be unified and the people to progress once more (Mendis 1932, 8).

---

Arul S. Aruliah is the managing editor of *Refuge* and guest edited this special issue on Sri Lanka.

Anusha Aruliah is a student of political science and philosophy at the University of Toronto.

The British provided the Ceylonese with an infrastructure that was quite modern. But unification, in a traditional nationalist sense (that is, identification with the nation as opposed to ethnic or regional identification), was noticeably absent. Prior to the arrival of the British, the northern regions of Sri Lanka were not integrated with the south. In fact, there were three independent kingdoms. "Out of what once were the two Sinhalese kingdoms of Kandy and Kotte and the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna, in 1802, the British created their first crown colony, Ceylon" (U.S. Committee for Refugees 1991, 4).

English education was beginning to be the norm for the higher castes of both the Sinhalese (the *goyigamas*<sup>2</sup>) and their Tamil counterparts, the *vellalas*. The Anglicized schooling that prevailed was taught at missionary schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For many new Christians, motives for conversion were more practical than religious. They became entitled to free schooling. Introduction of the North-South railway system facilitated the southward migration of English-educated Tamils. And, as a result, "during the first two decades of Sri Lankan independence, Ceylon Tamils, who constituted only 12% of the island's population, held 40% of public sector employment" (Perera 1992). There was a feeling in the majority community that the minority community had a disproportionate hold on public service positions.

Furthermore, during the colonial period, there was growing discontent within the Sinhala-Buddhist community on the secondary position of Buddhism in the country. "The Buddhist revival of the second half of the nineteenth century was the first phase in the recovery of national pride in the island, the first step in a long process which culminated in the growth of nationalism in the twentieth century" (De Silva 1981, 343). The truth of this becomes obvious when placed in

context. At the time, the British governors enforced a policy of state neutrality. Buddhism was slowly and covertly supported, especially after the Kotahena riots of 1883 (a Buddhist-Catholic conflict), with small monetary donations for the repair of a *dagoba*<sup>3</sup> and a gift of lamps. The incremental growth of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism ensured that elitist Christian Sinhala leaders, unlike their Tamil brethren, would conform to nationalist principles if they wanted to lead that community. Communal conflicts were religion-based at the turn of the century; as the end of the twentieth century draws near, Sri Lanka is being ravaged by a civil war that has its basis in an ethno-cultural perspective. "Ethnic identity has taken over from religious identity" (Stirrat 1984 197). In fact, in the 1983 riots that devastated Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, both Sinhalese Catholics and Buddhists carried out attacks on Tamil Catholics (Stirrat 1984). The change in the nature and size of the conflict in Sri Lanka has ramifications beyond the tiny nation itself, especially for countries at the receiving end of the steady stream of refugees from Sri Lanka.

The ethnic struggle used to have political beneficiaries; now there can be no beneficiaries until the war is over. The evolution and escalation of the conflict took place over a number of years with the tacit acknowledgment and later direct intervention of the state. There were many indications of where the conflict would lead—the type of government and its problems after independence and the communal riots that plagued the country are examples. After 1983, the very nature of the conflict changed. But the progress of the conflict was left unchecked. Painfully tragic results have changed the way of life for a nation.

## Stirrings of Discontent

The religious conflicts that occurred in the early 1900s were the Sinhalese and Tamils' responses to the emerging sense

of animosity against an alien culture with all its trappings. One element of the alien culture was the Catholic church. There were a series of violent encounters between Catholics and Buddhists: Ambalangoda in 1890, Wadduwa in 1891, Kalutara in 1897 and Anuradhapura in 1903; and between Catholics and Hindus: Negombo in 1899 and Neervali in 1902.

The elite class of Sri Lankan society did not have well defined "racial" boundaries at the time. They were simply Ceylonese. A combination of wealth and English education elevated them to that position. They were mobilizing among themselves to become a viable political force. Their motives were quite clear-cut. They were being barred from the highest echelons of the land, no matter how qualified or how capable. In an extreme example, a Whitehall (British government) official told a prominent Sri Lankan lawyer that the man chosen to be attorney-general "must be a good lawyer and ought to be pure white..." (De Silva 1981, 322).

Political representation under the British was in the form of the Legislative Council. The ratio for the council, whose purpose was to elicit information about local conditions, was fixed, by convention, at three Europeans and one from each Ceylonese community: Sinhalese, Tamil and Burgher. However, the effectiveness of the representation was greatly limited by the fact that the successive Sri Lankan members of the council all tended to come from the same families. Finally the Ceylon National Congress was formed in 1917; it was a multiracial, multidominational party whose common links were elitist in nature. Until 1921, its leader was Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a Tamil, whose prestige was so great that it subsequently made his post prestigious:

What distinguished élite politics in Ceylon in the first two decades of the twentieth century from succeeding decades was the harmony that prevailed between the Sinhalese and Tamil leaderships. In the political jargon of the day there were two majority communities, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and the minorities were the

smaller racial groups. The situation changed fundamentally after 1922 [the time of the Donoughmore Constitution] when ... there was one majority community - the Sinhalese - the Tamils now regarding themselves increasingly as a minority community. It has remained so ever since (De Silva 1981, 387).

According to K.M. De Silva, this promising time in Sri Lankan history was unparalleled. However, there were stirrings of trouble from the outset. It is true that these were not of ethnic leanings, but were instead due to the fact that the Ceylon National Congress was the bastion of the elite, none of whom shared the same political outlook. When the party was formed, there were two identifiable factions: the constitutional elite, who proposed a political goal of responsible self-government for Ceylon as a member of the British Empire. The other sector was radical; they favoured forceful opposition to British rule in the tradition of the Indian model.

In 1919, Sir William Manning, the new British governor, arrived. He did not approve of the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) and he used his considerable power to hasten the path of self-destruction that the CNC appeared to be taking. By the late 1920s, after the deliberations over the Donoughmore Constitution, the shift towards ethnocentric perspectives began. "Whilst the Sinhalese leaders favoured the 'one man, one vote' system, Tamil leaders objected to this on the grounds that it would give the Sinhalese majority total control over the country, and so they demanded some sort of communal representation to safeguard their position" (Stirrat 1984, 198).

But the Tamil leaders did not get what they demanded. Sri Lanka was unique at that stage. It was a full twenty years ahead of its African and Asian counterparts in the British Empire or Commonwealth with its universal suffrage. In 1931, 1936 and 1947, legislatures were elected by means of universal suffrage and the Sinhalese majority began to get more and more power because of their numbers.

### Disenfranchisement and the Issue of Colonization

When Sri Lanka became an independent nation in 1948, replete with Westminster-style democracy, Britain and the Ceylonese overlooked a fundamental flaw. By ignoring the fact that, although Tamils constituted a minority of the general population, they constituted a very definite majority in certain areas of Sri Lanka — the northern and, to a slightly lesser degree, eastern parts of the country — Sri Lanka was left in a state that could easily have led to disarray and eventually did so.

Colonization was and remains an important issue of conflict. It was the government-sponsored colonization schemes of predominantly Tamil areas that caused a problem. "Tamils see it as a deliberate attempt to deprive their areas of continuity and thus decrease their communal bargaining power. They point out that hardly any Tamils have been settled under official auspices in Sinhalese areas" (Schwarz 1988, 10). The colonization schemes began in the 1930s. One of the largest of the pre-1953 projects was the one at Gal Oya in the Amparai District, which was initially a predominantly Tamil area.

Table 1: Population Change in Selected Districts

	Tamils			Sinhalese		
	1953	1971	% Change	1953	1971	% Change
Jaffna	477,304	673,043	41	6,183	20,402	230
Batticaloa	130,381	246,582	89	31,174	94,150	202
Trincomalee	37,517	73,255	95	15,296	55,308	262
Puttalam	9,010	30,994	244	31,587	309,298	879

Data adapted from Schwarz 1988, 10

The settlement of large numbers of Sinhalese peasants in the Gal Oya Basin made it feasible for the government to create a separate electoral district for the Sinhalese and increase Sinhalese representation in the parliament. Indeed, the Amparai Electoral District is represented by a Sinhalese member of parliament (Manogaran 1987, 93).

Such colonization has long been recognized as a part of Tamil grievances because of the loss of power to Tamil representation. However, the schemes have been amplified as shown in Table 1.

The prime minister of the newly-independent Sri Lanka, D.S. Senanayake, assured G.G. Ponnambalam and his Tamil Congress that Tamil rights would be protected under the direction of the United National Party (UNP). He convinced Ponnambalam and others, to cross the floor and join the UNP. Among those who remained in Opposition were S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, a Tamil Christian, and his retinue, who vehemently opposed the disenfranchisement of Indian Tamils who were rendered stateless by D.S. Senanayake's government in 1949. "The legislation denying citizenship and voting rights to most Indian Tamils was passed by a Sinhalese-dominated parliament to satisfy the Kandyan Sinhalese, who were resentful [because] ... the agricultural land and employment opportunities for the indigenous population were limited" (Manogaran 1987, 19). But the underlying fear of Sinhalese politicians was that the Tamil population, Indian and Sri Lankan, would unite against the Sinhalese.

The ease with which the laws were passed distressed Chelvanayakam who then founded the Federal Party (FP). His view was that within a unitary form of government, minority rights were not protected and indeed were in considerable jeopardy. He said, "[today], justice is being denied to Indian Tamils. Some day in the future, when language becomes the issue, the same [will] befall the Ceylon Tamils" (Ram 1989, 37). The disenfranchisement of the Indian Tamils became a contentious issue that demonstrated how much was lacking in the government structure. Much of the

blame can be connected to the elite politicians who formulated the political structure. On a very simplistic level, it could be argued that because of their Anglicization, they could not see the necessity of taking into account the needs of the masses. However, it is more likely that they chose to ignore the social reality, naively assuming that the 5 to 6 percent English-speaking population would remain in power after successive elections. By not acknowledging these realities, the elitists orchestrated their own downfall.

### Emergence of the Language Issue

The man who would eventually destroy the elitist stranglehold on power came from that social stratum. Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike, originally a Christian, was a member of a wealthy, prominent Sinhalese family. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's father was an Anglo-ophile who named his son for the British governor, James West Ridgeway. Although Bandaranaike was very well educated in English (he attended Oxford), he was illiterate in Sinhala<sup>4</sup>; he was also the man who was swept into power under the auspices of the "Sinhala Only" Act. There was a growing sense of alienation with the realization that although English was spoken by a very small minority, it was the language of the state: the courts, police, parliamentary debates, government administration, banking and university instruction. "Initially, the Sinhala-language movement was purely anti-Western, but later it began to develop anti-Tamil overtones as well" (McGowan 1992, 155). Both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists denounced English as an official language. Instead, they advocated a return to *svabasha*,<sup>5</sup> which would provide equal rights for both Tamil and Sinhalese languages. Soon, however, Bandaranaike was exploiting the explosive language issue for his own political purposes. The election year was 1956, which fortunately for Bandaranaike, was also the year of the Buddha Jayanthi:

Jayanthi was the 2,500 year anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment, the very epicenter of his 5,000 year teaching. At that point, Buddhists be-

lieved, the dharma would be spread throughout the world and would produce an unprecedented spiritual awakening. In Lanka, Jayanthi had an even greater significance, making the completion of 2,500 years of Buddhism, the life of the Sinhalese race, and the length of recorded history and continuous political institutions, a threefold event of great mystical power in the Sinhalese mind (McGowan 1992, 150-1).

The Buddha Jayanthi was instrumental in bringing religion into the fray of the language and culture wars. With Bandaranaike denouncing "the invisible yoke of evil, unenlightened teachings, practices, habits, customs, and views fostered by the British" (McGowan 1992, 151), the *bhikkhus* (Buddhist monks) were encouraging many Sinhalese to vote for Bandaranaike.

At the time of independence, Sri Lanka was left with two major parties and some smaller exclusively Tamil parties. The ruling UNP was technically a non-ethnic party. In reality, its members were "committed to Sinhalese nationalism" (Obeyesekere 1984, 156); but the UNP was also committed to unity, or more realistically, committed to allaying the fears of either community: "...[Sir John] Kotelawala [then prime minister] assured the Sri Lankan Tamils, during a visit to Jaffna in late 1954, that appropriate legislation would be adopted to make both Sinhala and Tamil the official languages of the country" (Manogaran 1987, 43). This action dismayed many Sinhalese. Bandaranaike capitalized on their fears.

The UNP reversed its position in 1955 by declaring that Sinhala should be the official language, but it was a futile action. To vote for the UNP, the *bhikkhus* assured the populace, would be cultural suicide. The reversal of the UNP position on language deprived them of whatever popular support they had from the Tamil population. It was no surprise then that S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) coalition<sup>6</sup> won a landslide victory in the April 1956 election. Bandaranaike had said that the Official Language Act would have a provision for what he

called "reasonable use of Tamil." However, once in power, any attempt he made to include Tamil in the Official Language Act was greeted with derision, and the Opposition accused the prime minister of conceding the rights of the Sinhalese to the Tamils. The Federal Party (led by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam) organized peaceful mass demonstrations against the "Sinhala Only" Act. Infuri-

ated demands of regional autonomy. In fact, in 1926 Bandaranaike promoted the federal state structure, within the existing unitary state framework to appease the Kandyan Sinhalese, who were demanding autonomy. The B-C Pact was considered "one of the few statesman-like compromises... ever to be attempted in Sri Lanka" (Ponnambalam 1983, 112). It was abandoned when Sinhalese Bud-

nation or state is incomprehensible to the popular mind. The emphasis on the sense of uniqueness of the Sinhalese past, and the focus on Sri Lanka as the land of the Sinhalese and the country in which Buddhism stood forth in its purest form, carried an emotional appeal compared with which a multi-racial polity was a meaningless abstraction (De Silva 1981, 512).

---

***There was a growing awareness among Tamil leaders that their Sinhalese compatriots, with whom they had agitated for independence from the British, were quite willing to subjugate Tamils if it was politically advantageous.***

---

ated Sinhalese mobs beat the Tamil protesters; "[this] violence was accompanied by an anti-Tamil riot, resulting in the killing of more than one hundred Tamils at the government-sponsored Gal Oya colonization scheme in Amparai District" (Manogaran 1987, 48).

There was a growing awareness among Tamil leaders that their Sinhalese compatriots, with whom they had agitated for independence from the British, were quite willing to subjugate Tamils if it was politically advantageous. The Tamil leaders, too, had their motives for their political strategies; however, much of their energies were devoted to fighting the openly discriminatory policies that the MEP coalition had introduced. By 1957, the Federal Party threatened Bandaranaike with a campaign of *satyagraha*<sup>7</sup> unless their demands—parity between Sinhalese and Tamil as two official languages, an end to the planned Sinhalese colonization of predominantly Tamil areas, the granting of citizenship rights to "Indian Tamils", and most importantly, regional autonomy were met.

Bandaranaike "... was convinced that the Tamils were determined to defend their legitimate rights and, in order to avert a major ethnic conflict, he agreed to negotiate a political settlement to the conflict in July 1957" (Manogaran 1987, 49). The settlement was known as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam (B-C) Pact. Both leaders agreed on a devolution of powers in order to meet the

dhist extremists and the Opposition voiced their protests in a multitude of ways. One of the most famous, by J.R. Jayewardene of the UNP (who was originally a Christian), was the October 4, 1957 march to Kandy to invoke divine blessings for the campaign against the B-C Pact. Jayewardene, who would lead Sri Lanka after 1977, then said: "[the] time has come for the whole Sinhalese race, which has existed for 2,500 years jealously safeguarding its language and religion, to fight without giving any quarter to save its birthright" (McGowan 1992, 161). It was said that the B-C Pact would have reasonably assuaged Tamil fears of domination, but when it was abrogated

While the Sinhalese government was trying to implement its policies, the Tamil politicians were attempting to make clear the distinction between Sinhalese nationalism and Ceylonese nationalism, which were being equated at the time.

Even in 1951, the Federal Party was setting out the configurations for Tamil nationalism centred around the language, history and distinctiveness of the culture. In 1958, after *satyagraha* went into effect, the country was aflame with riots and four days passed without the declaration of a state of emergency. Hundreds of innocent civilians were murdered. People were tortured, beaten and shot simply for not being able to pronounce certain words correctly; a number of *goondas*<sup>8</sup> killed their own people who were too frightened to pronounce words correctly. The government's lack of response would prove to be the rule instead of the exception, and Tamils, moderates and extremists, were infuriated (Vittachi 1958).

---

***The Tamil leaders, too, had their motives for their political strategies; however, much of their energies were devoted to fighting the openly discriminatory policies that the MEP coalition had introduced.***

---

in April 1958, the threatened campaign of *satyagraha* was enforced. Sri Lanka succumbed to a wave of nationalist tendencies as K.M. De Silva explains:

[one] of the immediate consequences of the transformation of nationalism was that the concept of a multi-racial polity was no longer politically viable. In Sinhalese the words for *nation*, *race* and *people* are practically synonymous and a multi-racial or multi-communal

Bandaranaike also had to deal with the many and often bitter conflicts within his coalition government. On September 26, 1959, he was assassinated by a bhikku who belonged to a radical right-wing faction of the coalition. Bandaranaike's wife, Sirima, immediately assumed power. Many Sinhalese and Tamil leaders had two very different ideologies as to where Sri Lanka should head in the latter half of the twentieth century. This

difference of opinion would eventually lead to disaster.

The politics of the 1960s were essentially under the control of Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike, the leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), who was returned to power in July 1960. The world's first female prime minister was "not reluctant to take on two inflammable issues at the same time" (De Silva 1981, 512). She passed the provisions of the 'Sinhala Only' bill into effect which stated that Sinhala should be the language of administration by 1961. "The Tamil people must accept the fact that the Sinhala majority will no longer permit themselves to be cheated of their rights" (McGowan 1992, 161), she explained. This was despite the unofficial

for the armed struggle that ensued in the following decades.

Mrs. Bandaranaike's party stayed in power until 1965 when Dudley Senanayake (son of former prime minister, D.S. Senanayake), returned to the office of Prime Minister, which he held briefly in 1952-53. Dudley Senanayake came when Sri Lanka's literacy (excluding the 0-4 age group) was almost 85 percent. "[As] a result of its long standing commitment to free education (in the sense of free tuition) at all levels—primary, secondary and tertiary—Sri Lanka in the 1960s became an outstanding example of the growing global phenomenon of educated unemployed" (De Silva 1981, 538). Dudley Senanayake's government devised a program of agri-

However, this goal was not necessarily achieved:

[Standardization] did not lead to better chances for schools in backward and rural areas as is sometimes alleged. In fact provincial distribution of places remained almost unaltered except for a fall in the share of science admissions from the Northern province. It is in the ethnic break-down that the real impact can be seen. The percentage of Tamil medium students entering courses in engineering fell from 40.8% in 1970/1 to 24.4% in 1973/4 (De Silva in Schwarz 1988, 9).

The corresponding period saw the emergence of armed militancy among Tamil students. Tamil moderate leaders became increasingly discredited in the eyes of the Tamil people because of issues like standardization but what finally reduced their political clout was their inability to protect the Tamil population from violence. Mrs. Bandaranaike's government clamped down hard on Tamils who supported secession, and Tamils living in predominantly Sinhalese areas began to feel the brunt of the repression. Those who lived in the North also faced repression in many quarters, and they reacted:

The result was a spreading militancy and the growth of a martial spirit in a people who had long been known for passiveness.... But a generation of Tamil youth, raised in an almost perpetual state of conflict with the government—boycotts of schools, picketing of government offices, the performance of *satyagraha*, and the hoisting of black flags to protest government actions—had been radicalized (McGowan 1992, 177).

These radicalized youth, determined and fuelled by the conduct of the state police force, were the beginnings of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam militant group. In 1975, their leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, led a small group who claimed responsibility for the killing of the pro-government mayor of Jaffna. In retaliation, the police and the army detained and tortured over one hundred Tamil students for a year. None were ever formally charged, "establishing a pattern of collective punishment for

---

*The problem has changed in nature. Initially, the crisis was a constitutional one involving the protection of basic minority rights that were subject to political exploitation. In more recent years, increased militancy has rendered the concept of political victors inconceivable.*

---

electoral promises she had made to the FP. The Federal Party, in turn, initiated civil disobedience, which led, for the first time, to military suppression of the Tamil disobedience in the north and east. Mrs. Bandaranaike also implemented state control over all state-aided secondary schools. The powerful Roman Catholic minority was incensed and fought against it. However, they, too, were forced to acquiesce.

In 1962, the armed forces (consisting mainly of Sinhalese Christians and Burghers) attempted a coup d'état that was put down. The acceptance of "Sinhala Only" by the major parties gave rise to an exodus of disillusioned intelligentsia from all communities who left Sri Lanka to go to England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Many Tamils also went to "Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia and other emergent countries of Africa which wanted their learning, skills and expertise" (Ponnambalam 1983, 112). These wealthy expatriates would ultimately serve as a financial support base

cultural activities designed to incorporate the ranks of the unemployed, but the educated were not interested in those types of jobs. The educated unemployed became very receptive to the criticisms made by the Opposition.

Mrs. Bandaranaike came back into power in 1970 after combining the SLFP with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party under the banner of the United Front (UF). Mrs. Bandaranaike introduced ethnic quotas at universities in response to a general Sinhalese feeling that Tamils were somehow being favoured in admissions. The system of quotas, known as "standardization," was implemented in 1972. It was a system "in which marks obtained by candidates for university admission [were] weighted by giving advantage to certain linguistic groups and/or certain districts" (Schwarz 1988, 9). The government ostensibly sought to help the less proficient areas of Sri Lanka—in particular, Kandy and the upcountry Sinhalese.

acts committed against Sinhalese authority" (McGowan 1992, 177). After each communal riot, one of the most violent occurring in 1977, Tamils increasingly viewed the conflicts as struggles for personal and cultural survival instead of a confrontation over constitutional rights. The escalation was visible and Mrs. Bandaranaike's government was instrumental in using the police and armed forces as weapons of the state against its own indigenous population.

In 1977, J.R. Jayewardene and the UNP came to power. It was a year of reckoning for Sri Lanka. During the election campaign "[the] people's hatred of the long queues for essential foodstuffs, of injustices ... had been exploited with skill. At the same time every reactionary tendency, too, had been made use of" (Piyadasa 1984, 46). In the same election, a majority of Tamils supported the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) position as enunciated in the Vaddukoddai resolution:

The convention resolves that the restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular Socialist State of Tamil EELAM based on the right of self determination inherent to every nation has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil nation in this country (TULF in Perera 1992).

Jayewardene had made electoral promises to the Tamils specifically about their employment and education grievances. But like many other Sinhalese leaders, these were more platitudes than promises. By 1979, the Tigers were carrying out more attacks on people and structures that had government links. In July of that same year, Jayewardene gave the the army a mandate to enforce the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which curtailed civil liberties and enforced what could essentially be called military rule in the northern and eastern provinces. In 1981, there was spate of anti-Tamil violence in response to attacks by the Tamil Tigers, but the communal riots of 1983 were the catalysts for full-fledged civil war.

At present, Sri Lanka is a country in dire straits. Refugees stream out of the country in record numbers to escape the

consequences of the daily battles being fought in the north and east. Post-1983 has been a traumatic time for Sri Lanka. The Sinhala-Tamil conflict, which could have been averted with some forethought and a strong stance against political exploitation, appears to be uncontrollable in its present state. The problem has changed in nature. Initially, the crisis was a constitutional one involving the protection of basic minority rights that were subject to political exploitation. In more recent years, increased militancy has rendered the concept of political victors inconceivable. The survival of Sri Lankan society is now threatened, and the composition of minorities in the social fabric has been torn asunder. Inflammatory statements are the norm now for both the Sinhalese and Tamils. Sri Lanka is undergoing a most difficult time in its history. It remains to be seen whether a solution [see *Manogaran in this issue*] or solutions can be found to the complex and convoluted questions that make up the conflict. ■

## Notes

1. *Burghers*: The Eurasian descendants of Dutch colonists.
2. *Goyigama*: the highest of the major Sinhalese castes; there are subcastes within the caste of the goyigama. Literally "agriculturalist" (*Vellala*: the Tamil equivalent of goyigama). The parallel caste systems of both Sinhalese and Tamils indicates the similarity between the two groups. "[It] may well be that Sinhalese and Tamils have much in common genetically, their separation being, like so many similar cleavages the world over, primarily a linguistic and cultural one" (Farmer 1963, 8). In much of the literature concerning this subject, "race" and "ethnicity" have been used interchangeably. [see *Ramachandran in this issue on the role of culture in the ethnic conflict*]
3. *Dagoba*: A Buddhist relic mound.
4. The language is Sinhala. The people and culture are Sinhalese.
5. *Swabasha*: Indigenous languages—Sinhala and Tamil
6. Mahajana Eksath Peramuna was formed by Bandaranaike's party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Viplavakari [Revolutionary] Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the Basha Peramuna (Language Front) and independents.

7. *Satyagraha*: Civil disobedience movement along the Gandhian pattern.
8. *Goonda*: Hoodlum, unemployable vagabond.

## References

- De Silva, K.M. 1981. *A History of Sri Lanka*. London: C. Hurst and Company.
- Farmer, B.H. 1963. *Ceylon: A Divided Nation*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Manogaran, Chelvadurai. 1987. *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- McGowan, William. 1992. *Only Man Is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Mendis, G.C. 1932. *The Early History of Ceylon*. Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House.
- Obeyesekere, Gananath. 1984. "The Origins and Institutionalization of Political Violence." In *Sri Lanka: In Change and Crisis*, edited by James Manor. London: Croom Helm Ltd.
- Perera, Jayantha. 1992. "Political Development and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 5, 2, 136-48.
- Piyadasa, L. 1984. *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After*. London: Marram Books.
- Ponnambalam, Satchi. 1983. *Sri Lanka: The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Ram, Mohan. 1989. *Sri Lanka: The Fractured Island*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Schwarz, Walter. 1988. *The Tamils of Sri Lanka*. Fourth edition. London: The Minority Rights Group.
- Stirrat, R.L. 1984. "The Riots and Roman Catholic Church in Historical Perspective." In *Sri Lanka: In Change and Crisis*, edited by James Manor. London: Croom Helm Ltd.
- U.S. Committee for Refugees. 1991. *Sri Lanka: Island of Refugees*. Prepared by Court Robinson. Washington: U.S. Committee for Refugees.
- Vittachi, Tarzie. 1958. *Emergency '58: The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots*. London: Andre Deutsch Limited.
- Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam. 1979. *Politics in Sri Lanka, 1947-1979*. London: The McMillan Press Ltd.

## Selected Readings

- Gunawardana, R.A.L.H., ed. 1979. *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, volume 5, numbers 1 & 2*. Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya.
- Hyndman, Patricia. 1988. *Sri Lanka: Serendipity under Siege*. Nottingham: Russell Press Ltd.
- Weaver, Mary Anne. March 21, 1988. "A Reporter at Large: The Gods and the Stars." *The New Yorker*.