# ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SRI LANKA

PAPERS PRESENTED AT A SEMINAR ORGANISED BY THE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS ASSOCIATION, DEC. 1979.

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## Introduction

The Social Scientists Association organised a Seminar on "Nationality Problems in Sri Lanka" in December 1979; this volume contains the papers presented at that seminar, some of them subsequently revised by their authors.

Discussion of ethnic or nationality problems in Sri Lanka, particularly the relationship between the Sinhala and Tamil communities has been always charged more with fervour than with intellectual analysis. Emotional bias has been more in evidence than a correct interpretation and analysis of the problem. It was against such a background that the SSA organised this seminar. It was significant and indeed path breaking in that it was the first occasion on which Sinhala and Tamil intellectuals had gathered together to discuss and analyse some aspects of the social, economic and ideological roots of continuing ethnic conflict.

This volume, though somewhat belated, appears at an opportune time; ethnic conflicts, the subject then of academic discussion, exploded in July 1983 into a paroxysm of violence unmatched in the country's recent history. We have now seen that the ideological and economic forces behind ethnic conflict can lead to savagery that puts into question the very civilizations we call ourselves heirs to. It is our hope that the papers in this volume will at least force some of the exponents of Sinhala and Tamil nationalism to look more closely at the myths, misinterpretations and misunderstandings that have nourished their ideologies.

The first two papers in this collection deal with the origins of the various peoples that now inhabit this country. Dr. Senake Bandaranayake in his paper describes on the basis of present knowledge, the way in which this island has been peopled by groups of migrants at various times; these groups

had later coalesced into a homogenous society, whose development had been associated with the growth of a centralised state. He also discusses the concepts of race, language and culture and proposes that internal developments in Sri Lanka-demographic, economic and social – were probably more important than foreign immigrations in shaping our society. The suggestion that language, religion and technology could, even at that time, cross geographical boundaries without being necessarily accompanied by immigration of persons is another valuable idea that Dr. Bandaranayake elucidates in his paper.

Dr. Susantha Goonatilake in his paper examines recent archaeological findings and reinterprets some of the material in the chronicles regarding early Sri Lankan culture. He demonstrates that in the pre-historic period, Sri Lanka and South India had been inhabited by a common group of people, with similar economic structures, technological base and culture. They had developed a settled agriculture based on irrigation and were probably the pioneers of the hydraulic technology that developed into the magnificient irrigation schemes of a later day. This society had been subsequently enriched by streams of migrants; a language and a religion both derived from North India and probably brought by some of these migrants established itself quickly all over the island and became the basis of Sinhala culture. It was this religion-Buddhism – that later played a dominant role in legitimising systems of rule and the hegemony of a particular group.

It will be observed that these two well documented studies expose the mythic nature of the history that traces the beginnings of Sri Lankan civilization to the arrival of Vijaya and his band of followers from North India. In fact, the island was, and had been for a long period, inhabited by a people with settled agriculture and it was an amalgam of those inhabitants and subsequent migrants that laid the foundations of Sri Lankan society. There is thus no priority in chronological time that could be construed as conferring priority of "ownership" on any particular group of migrants.

The next two articles are of particular interest in examining some historical aspects of the development of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity.

Dr. Leslie Gunawardena's paper is, perhaps the first attempt to trace the beginnings of a 'Sinhala' consciousness. He shows that, during the early stages of Sri Lankan history, the word 'Sinhala' had been applied only to the King and his immediate kin group; this identity had been witheld even from all other retainers and followers. Later the spread of those included within the concept 'Sinhala' had been widened, mainly in order to cement the adherence and loyalty of retainers and followers to the royal family. The whole process was associated with the growth of kingdoms and principalities, and at a still later stage, with the growth of a centralised state. Dr. Gunawardena also demonstrates that the numerous wars fought between the rulers of kingdoms and principalities located within the island itself or between them and the kings of neighbouring South Indian kingdoms did not have their basis in either religious or ethnic conflict. They were struggles for power between feudal kingdoms, often with dynastic connections; such kingdoms had within their embrace people of different ethnic groups and religions. The wars so frequently referred to in Sri Lankan history have been often of this type; the Dutugemunu – Elara war has also to be seen in this light. According to tradition, Dutugemunu had to overcome 32 other kings before he found himself sufficiently strong to attack Elara, whose armies contained many Sinhala soldiers and one of whose generals was indeed a Sinhalese. Another interesting aspect of this paper is its analysis of the origin of the Sinhala myth of Aryan descent and the ways in which this myth has been used to support various groups, even up to the present day.

Dr. W. I. Siriweera concentrates, in his article, specifically on the Dutugemunu – Elara conflict and its historiography. The *Dipavamsa*, the earlier chronicle, speaks in the highest terms of Elara's sense of justice and does not identify him as either a Tamil or a Chola: it shows Elara calling on Buddhist monks for advise and repairing inadvertent damage to Buddhist shrines. The later chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, written about 400 A. D. shows an altered emphasis; Elara is still a just king, but the war between Dutugemunu and Elara, now magnified to epic proportions, is shown as a war

fought to restore Sinhala Buddhist domination over the island from the usurpation of a Tamil Hindu. The *Pujavaliya*, written in the twelfth century, carries this transformation still further. Elara in this account is a cruel tyrant, oppressing the Sinhalese and indulging in anti-Buddhist activities, justly killed by a Sinhala ruler striving to re-establish the glory of the Buddhist order. In tracing the various interpretations of this episode, Dr. Siriweera makes the point that historians of each epoch tend to project their own feelings and situations on their view of past events. Most contemporary historians, particularly the writers of school texts, base their interpretations of this episode on the Mahavamsa - Pujavaliya tradition; this fact too needs to be analysed in the context of present day ethnic conflicts, particularly because the Dutugemunu legend is one very potent source used to nourish Sinhala chauvinism.

These articles thus lay bare the growth of a 'Sinhala' consciousness and the means by which it has been established and reinforced in the minds of the Sinhala people. This consciousness - expressed today in the concept that Sri Lanka is the land of the Sinhala people of Aryan descent - does not really derive from the island's history, if one is to understand and analyse it correctly. It is a myth that has been developed to legitimise the claims of the Sinhalese to sole ownership of this country. It becomes evident however, that this sense of identity, this concept of a Sinhala - Buddhist hegemony to be protected from the inroads of a South-Indian derived Tamil group has been pervasive from around the 4th century AD and forms, even today, the basis of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism and of ethnic conflict. That this concept arises from a distorted view of the island's history needs to be impressed on the minds of the Sinhala people, even though loosening the hold of such a powerful myth over their minds will be a difficult task.

The next set of articles in this collection deal with the growth of a Tamil consciousness in modern times. Dr. K. Sivathamby has undertaken an analysis of Tamil society as it exists in Sri Lanka today. It is composed of many segments: The Tamils in Jaffna, in Batticaloa, in the Mannar and Vavuniya districts have widely disparate economic structures and, consequently, differing social organisations and legal forms. However, despite the differences, these segments had drawn together and have now developed an identifiable Tamil consciousness. Dr. Sivathamby analyses the internal dynamics of this process, also relating it, as a response to the growth of Sinhala chauvinism.

Tamil consciousness, as it has thus developed in the 19th and 20th centuries is the subject matter of the paper by Dr. K. Kailasapathy. In examining the various elements which have contributed to the fashioning of this consciousness, Dr. Kailasapathy also examines cultural developments in Tamilnadu in South India which have had an impact on Tamil - speaking people in Sri Lanka. He refers particularly to the Dravida movement, which sought to establish a Dravidian linguistic and cultural identity in opposition to North-Indian influences. Of particular importance is Dr. Kailasapathy's description and evaluation of the manifestations of this consciousness in art and literature. It is significant that the Tamil people of Sri Lanka have been able to develop an autonomous literature that relates to but is not subordinate to Tamil literature in India. Indeed, the contributions of savants, scholars and artists from Jaffna to the formation of a modern Tamil literary and critical tradition in India have been important.

Tamil consciousness, like its Sinhala counterpart, harks back to history in search of legitimisation. The existence of a Tamil kingdom in the northern part of the island with its capital at Jaffna from about the end of the 13th century is often referred to by those who advocate political autonomy for the Tamils. It is unfortunate that our collection does not examine this background in some detail.

Whatever it's constituent elements, Tamil consciousness had developed within recent times to a position that was strong enough to draw into its fold for a short time the Tamil community of recent Indian origin. Unlike the Sri Lankan Tamil community who have been, as earlier articles have shown, inhabiting this country from its very beginnings, this

community is descended mainly from workers brought from South India from about 1840 onwards by British plantation interests. They are primarily located in the plantation areas of the central hill-country, adjacent to Sinhala villages; however, linguistic, religious and cultural differences have kept interaction between these groups to a minimum, a separation that was also encouraged by the colonial planters. Their social organisations, caste-structures and rituals are as yet extremely close to those of the communities in South India from which they originated. Despite a common language, these differences have kept them apart from Sri Lankan Tamils. The special political and economic problems that face the plantation Tamils and the development among them of a consciousness of an identity separate from the other Tamil peoples of Sri Lanka is the subject of the paper contributed by Mr. P. Devaraj. The organisations representing plantation Tamils came together with Sri Lankan Tamils in a Tamil United Front in the early seventies, but differing economic and political impulses forced the plantation Tamils to abandon this common front soon after. Today they stand as a distinct ethnic group with specific political and social objectives.

The next paper looks at some of the results of colonial policy on the nationality problem. Dr. Kumari Jayawardena in her paper traces the growth of capitalism in Sri Lanka, analyses its nature and characteristics and its influence on the relations between the two communities. Colonial economic policies prevented the growth of a strong national bourgeoisie with an anti-imperialist orientation. The nationalist movement that emerged therefore remained incipient and weak; it was primarily moderate and was not able to develop into a mass-based nationalist struggle that brought within its fold all ethnic groups. In this context, the movement, though it had earlier contained some elements of the Tamil bourgeoisie, fell under the dominance of the chauvinism of the major ethnic group, the Sinhalese. This process was facilitated by the fact that the Sinhala bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie found that opportunities for economic advancement through trade were blocked by British and Indian merchant capital; and since traders belonged to local minorities, they could in these circumstances divert the energies of the nationalist movement against Indian and other "un-Sinhala" ethnic groups. The religious and cultural revival that was a constituent element of the nationalist movement also reinforced this tendency; the resurrection of the glories of ancient Sinhala culture, the protection of the Buddhist religion, a duty which is said to have been cast on the Sinhalese by the Buddha himself, the safeguarding of the Sinhala race, said to have descended from Aryan immigrants from North India, against contamination from un-Aryan elements, became the 'sacred cows' of the cultural and religious revival. It is interesting to note that these myths still continue to sway the emotions of the Sinhala people and that the slogans created by Anagarika Dharmapala, the chief exponent of these views in the early 20te century, are still being repeated today.

These antagonistic tendencies between the two major ethnic groups were, of course, exploited by the colonial rulers. The absence of a multi-ethnic nationalist ideology permitted the British to undertake various constitutional manipulations which tended to keep the groups apart. Susil Sirivardhana in his paper examines these manipulations. The principle of ethnic representation in the legislature was one of the means adopted to keep ethnic differences alive and to prevent the formation of a bloc sufficiently strong to challenge British rule.

The working class that was emerging in the urban centres also came under the influence of communalist ideology. Neil Kuruppu's article refers to the formation of this class and to its failure to develop a strong sense of class - consciousness. The absence of a proletarian class consciousness, in the context of the dominance of primodial ideologies caused the workers to lapse into communalism during periods of economic crisis. The fact that the workers themselves were not wholly cut off from the means of petty production in land was probably a contributory factor in this situation. The left parties that emerged during the thirties and which, at the beginning, organised the major trade unions and were successful in bringing under their leadership the large mass of the working-class were subsequently unable to overcome the influences of Sinhala chauvinism among the class. As a matter of fact, the parties themselves succumbed

later to these same influences. The structure of a working class that emerges during the distorted development of capitalism and the nature of its consciousness are probably aspects that require further study.

The next two articles deal with two specific but inter-related issues that have tended to exacerbate Sinhala-Tamil relations during the recent past-education and employment. Education, particularly in English, has been seen as one of the primary sources of economic and social advancement in both ethnic groups. The lack of alternative economic opportunities in their traditional homelands is often given as one of the reasons for the greater dependence of Tamils on state employment and professional jobs.

Competition for university places has always been severe; this was complicated by the fact that entrance examinations could be taken in either Sinhala or Tamil. Allegations of improper marking have been made at various times and these led to a system of media-wise standardisation. These policies and their impact on the availability of university places for students from the various ethnic groups are examined by Sunil Bastian.

The ethnic composition of the higher rungs of the state services is examined, on a historical basis, by Charles Abeysekera. The broad conclusion here is that educational policies and the shift to Sinhala as the official language have combined to ensure a greater proportion of state jobs for the Sinhala majority - even in excess of their proportions in the total population. Yet the perception that the other ethnic groups have a larger than due proportion of jobs remains firm in Sinhala consciousness and continues to be a motivating factor of importance in ethnic conflict.

It will be noticed that the papers in this collection generally refer to the ideological aspects of the nationality question in Sri Lanka. They do not (with one exception), relate these ideologies to specific economic circumstances. Nevertheless it is economic issues - the lack of development and consequent employment opportunities in the Tamil regions, the relative paucity of access to land in the colonisation schemes in those areas – which form the sub-stratum of ethnic conflict today. It is also these factors that shape the precise contours of such conflicts. It is possible, for example, to argue from the specific ways in which conflicts have manifested themselves that Sinhala nationalism during the early part of this century was essentially based on perceived economic disabilities in the broad context of imperialism, that cultural, linguistic and other superstructural elements were predominant in its makeup in the 1950s and that today economic determinants have once more come to the fore. Again, in analysing the evolution of Tamil political demands to the point of separatism, it is necessary to look continuously at the economic bases and the character of these demands.

Intellectual analysis may not have the same power as emotion-packed myths but we hope that these essays will serve, at least in some measure, to reduce the present virulent manifestations of ethnic antagonisms.

It was the intention of the SSA to organise in Jaffna a second seminar to discuss some of these problems. Due to a variety of reasons, chief among them being the deteriorating political climate, it was not possible to implement this decision. We hope however to continue with studies on these aspects of the nationality question and to publish them; it is also our intention to put them out in more popular form.

Finally we thank all those who helped in the publication of these articles and apologize to our readers for deficiencies in page numbering which were due to circumstances beyond our control.

# The Peopling of Sri Lanka: the National Question and Some Problems of History and Ethnicity.

Senake Bandaranayake

Questions of history and 'ethnicity' have played, almost universally, an important role in the formation of modern nations. They continue to occupy a prominent place in contemporary politics the world over and constitute, in many situations, an integral aspect of the 'national question'. Although the basis of the relationships between ethnic groups lies outside the realm of ideas, concepts of ethnic identity, territoriality, historical origin, 'racial' distinctiveness, biological and cultural exclusiveness or superiority, form part of the ideological and psychological matrix that nurtures inter-ethnic conflict and contradiction; and from which arises that specifically modern phenomenon, *racism* or, in its less aggressive form, *ethnic chauvinism* (often subsumed under two terms, 'communalism' in South Asia and 'tribalism' in Africa).

The 20th century experience in this regard is most instructive. It shows that the evolution of various modern political and social systems – and especially those of an extremly rightist or fascist type – often draws great sustenance from racist ideas. It is also clear that the momentum generated by those ideas is not easily solved by even the most advanced and progressive forms of political, social and cultural development. Thus, at one end of the spectrum, societies such as South Africa and Israel continue to have structured racism as an integral part of their social, economic and political base, while at the other end of the spectrum, societies which have undergone various forms and degrees of socialist transformation such as the Soviet Union or China, still continue to have problems raised by inter-ethnic conflicts and contradictions.

The matter becomes more complicated when we consider that ethnic self – identity and self-consciousness (or national consciousness) have also had a positive role in history, binding together dispersed or expanding groups and contributing to the development of more advanced forms of social organisation or forming a powerful 'spiritual' force in the struggle against foreign conquest and domination. The contradictory nature of this phenomenon is best seen in many Third World countries, where a progressive nationalism is often intertwined with backward forms of national chauvinism, communalism, casteism and tribalism-the one contributing to the struggle against colonialism and foreign domination and the other activating internal strife and the oppression of minorities.

These problems are well known to us in Sri Lanka where, since the beginnings of the national movement in the 19th and early 20th century, the history, origins, status, territorial rights, identity, distinctiveness. etc. of various nationalities and caste groups have been the subject of heated internal debate and polemic, fuelling communal conflict and often forming a more conspicuous issue than the struggle against foreign domination. This is apparent for example. in the caste debates of the 19th century, the chauvinism of the early Sinhala and Tamil nationalists, the Ramanathan-Azeez polemic, the Suntheralingam controversies (amongst others) of the 1950s and 1960s, the more recent 'archaeological' controversies at the Sansoni Commission hearings, etc. – all intellectual expressions of the underlying social, economic and ethnic contradictions which have from time to time broken out into open and violent communal conflict.

Thus, in our own context, as elsewhere in the world, historical notions and the consciousness of ethnic differentiation form a fundamental and highly visible aspect of the national question, the daily currency of communal tension and conflict. Historians, sociologists and all those working in relevant fields are thereby compelled, in one way or another, to address themselves to these issues and have a special responsibility to lay bare some of the myths and distortions that lie at the heart of these ideas. While such attempts may not



directly contribute to solving the national question, they help in the disestablishment of what we might call the cultural structures of communalism and in the formation of a modern scientific consciousness in matters of history and ethnicity, especially a sense of *national Sri Lankan unity*.

The present paper has a limited objective. It raises, somewhat at random, a few issues of history and ethnicity which have some bearing on the national question in our country and on the contradictions, conflicts and debates that have arisen in that context. There is an extensive literature on these subjects but there is no attempt here to present a survey or critical analysis of this literature. Instead this paper presents an orientation and interpretation of some broad historical issues and patterns and deals specifically with the question of our present state of knowledge regarding the peopling and settlement of the island in prehistoric and proto-historic times.

The first question that should be raised is a fundamental one: the concept of *race* and the tendency to identify *race* with *culture*. The idea of race itself is so abstruse that physical anthropologists have never been able to come to any agreement about its nature or its origins. Human variation is an extremely complex subject and in a scientific sense has no connection with ethnic i.e. ethno-cultural, differentiation. For instance, we do not know whether the visible physiological ("phenotype") differences we see between the so-called 'races of man' or the invisible genetic (or genotype) variations that we can detect are the result of very ancient divergences and cross-connections going back in geological time to man's hominid ancestors of the Pleistocene epoch three million years ago, *or* whether there are factors which have arisen in relatively recent, post-Pleistocene times, that is to say, about 10,000 or 15,000 years ago. The latter is much more likely. In any case, so much intermixture has taken place since that time that the only classification of the human race that is possible is into the four or five broad categories such as Negroid, Caucasoid, Mongoloid, etc. Whether that classification itself is of any use whatsoever

is doubtful. It applies only to such visible or detectable characteristics as skin, colour and blood group variations, These factors themselves are not invariables, being affected by such variables as environment, nutrition, disease, genetic drift, etc. Thus, as Claude Levi-Strruss, in a famous essay on "Race and Culture" observes: "*Anthropologists have simply ceased to use the concept (of race) at all*". On the other hand, looked at in a much narrower sense, the fact that human communities tend to interbreed amongst themselves in relatively narrow groups and even narrower spatial or geographical limits does result in the perpetuation of certain superficial biological traits among communities—that is to say, we can sometimes detect a higher frequency of particular phenotypical or genotypical characteristics among certain groups, that marginally differentiate them from others. This is sometimes useful to historians, prehistorians and palaeodemographers in detecting ancient migratory and demographic patterns, but we can scarcely apply the term *race* to these differences.

If the concept of race itself is so dubious, the attempt to equate *race* with *culture* is even more so. We can today say quite categorically that culture is in no way affected or determined by race, that is to say, there is no possible equation between the genetically acquired biological traits of a particular ethnic group or community and the historically acquired cultural traits that distinguish and define that community as an ethnic group. It is as common an error in day to day discourse as in the rhetoric of communal discord, to use the term 'race', with clear biological connotations, when what is meant is 'an ethnic group'. What 'ethnic group' signifies is a historically defined, self-conscious community, which has its own distinctive history and culture, of which language and religion often constitute important aspects, and which has or had definite territorial affiliations, in the present and/or the past.

Applying these observations to the subject of our discussion today, we may consider two fundamental notions that apply to the context of inter-ethnic contradictions in our own



country in modern times: one, the concepts of 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian', and two, the question of the so-called different 'races' that inhabit Sri Lanka today. The idea that 'Aryans and Dravidians' constitute different races is a common fallacy frequently rejected by scholars, but so deeply embedded in both popular and scholarly thinking that it still has common currency. The essence of the matter is that the term 'Aryan' refers to a linguistic phenomenon, the Indo-European family of languages; to a particular aspect of Indian history, i.e. the role of the Vedic Aryans in the formation of Indian history and culture; and to the concept of 'Arya' in Hindu and Buddhist thought. The full and proper meaning of the term is best clarified by two extensive extracts from A. L. Basham and Romila Thapar.

"We must be quite sure what we mean when we talk of Aryans and Dravidians. In an Indian context the term Aryan *originally* was the name of a group of kindred peoples who entered India in the middle of the second millennium B. C. and some of whom composed the hymns of the *Rg Veda*. In those days the word was more or less racial (*sic*) in connotation. Later the term came to mean a person who was accepted as a better-class follower of the Dharma of Class and *Asrama* (Varnasrama dharma) associated with early Hinduism — a man of the brahman, kshatriya or vaisya order who had undergone the ceremony of *upanayana* (initiation with the sacred thread) — and in one text at least, the *Kautilya Arthasastra* (iii, 13) it explicitly includes the better type of sudra. The Buddhists used the term *Arya* with a wide connotation, and in their texts it often seems to mean merely 'noble' or 'excellent' as in the *chattari ariya-sachchani*, the 'Four Noble Truths'. Thus, according to the usage of more than two thousand years, the Tamil brahman is strictly speaking an Aryan, and the common Tamil honorific *Aiyar*, added to so many proper names, is in fact ultimately derived from the Sanskrit *Arya*.

"In ancient days there was a vaguely defined region of South India known in the North as *Dravida* probably a corruption of the word *Tamil*. This word was applied by the nineteenth century philologist Caldwell to a group of languages, spoken mainly

in the Peninsula — its four chief tongues being Tamil, Telegu, Kannada and Malayalam. The ethnologist Risley borrowed the term and applied it to a certain ethnic (*sic*) type, which he found in many parts of India, but in highest concentration in the Peninsula. Later ethnologists and anthropologists do not normally use the term in learned publications. In fact in scientific usage there is no Dravidian race and no Aryan race, but the two terms are used only in linguistic or perhaps cultural contexts. Politicians may attach other senses to them, but in doing so they have no good scientific basis". (Basham )

"By far the most influential theory to emerge from Indological studies in the nineteenth century was the Theory of the Aryan Race. The word *arya* which occurs in both the Iranian Avestan and Vedic Sanskrit texts, was given a racial connotation, as referring to the race of the Aryans. They were described as physically different from the indigenous population and their cultural distinctiveness was apparent from the fact that they spoke an Indo-European language. It was held that large numbers of *aryans*, described as a branch of the Indo-European race and language group, invaded northern India in the second millennium B.C., conquered the indigenous peoples and established the Vedic Aryan culture which became the foundation of Indian culture.

"The identification of language and race was seen to be a fallacy even during the lifetime of Max Muller, one of the more active proponents of the theory. Although in his later writings he rejected this identification, it was by then too late, and the idea had taken root. It is curious that *aryan* should have been interpreted in racial terms since in the texts it refers merely to an honoured person of high status and in the Vedic context, this would be one who spoke Sanskrit and observed the caste regulations. The racial connotation may have been due to the counter-posing of *arya* with *dasa*, in the Rg Veda, where the *dasa* is described as physically dissimilar to the *arya*. This was interpreted as representing two racial types with the *aryas* evolving later into the three upper castes and the *dasa* remaining the lowest, *sudra* caste, the racial identity of each being preserved by forbidding inter-marriage between the castes. The pre-eminence



of the *arya* was explained as due to the successful conquest of the *aryas* over the *dasas*. The term *varna* etymologically associated with colour and occurring as a technical term referring to the caste organisation of society, was used as yet another argument to support the Aryan theory of race. It was believed to provide a 'scientific' explanation for caste, namely, that the four main castes represented major racial groups, whose racial identity was preserved by forbidding inter-marriage and making birth the sole criterion for caste status. The latter half of the nineteenth century in Europe was concerned with the discussion on race in the theories of Gobineau and the growing interest in social evolution. Some of the Indologists were by no means unfamiliar with this debate. The distinction between *aryan* and *non-aryan*, and the polarity of Aryan and Dravidian suggested by them for the Indian scene, echoes to a degree which can hardly be regarded as coincidental, the *aryan — non-aryan* distinction and the Aryan-Semitic dichotomy based on language and race, in the European context. The suggested social bifurcation is also remarkably similar; the upper castes were the aryans and the lower castes were the non-aryans". (Thapar)

What the Aryan-Dravidian misconception represents in the Sri Lankan (as in the Indian) context, is the way in which purely modern misinterpretations are projected into history and play a key role in providing historical sanction for the ethnic self-identity of the two major nationalities which inhabit the island, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Much of the debate in this connection has also centred on territorial claims based on 'ancient historical presence', proceeding from '*we* were here before *you*' and 'this is *our* ancient homeland' arguments. The validity of such propositions themselves, which would call into question the very basis of many advanced modern states, has never been raised. Even scholarly attention has been directed only at the verification or falsification of the propositions themselves, rather than at the relevance or irrelevance of 'ancient historical presence' to the process of modern nation formation.

One of the issues central to the discussion is the long historical process involved in the peopling and settlement of the island, in both historic and prehistoric times. As an island

territory, lying off the southern extremity of the South Asian subcontinent, there is no doubt that the peopling of Sri Lanka took place through two distinct and sometimes interrelated processes: one, by a series of migrations both by land and by sea and the other by internal population expansion. Hitherto, however, both scholarly research and popular belief have placed the greatest emphasis and devoted almost the whole of their attention to the migratory factor while almost entirely ignoring the question of internal development. It is the traditional view that the Vadda people are aboriginal, the Sinhalese are the descendants of protohistoric migrants from North India, the Tamils are of South Indian stock, the Muslims descended from Arabian immigrants, the Burghers from Portugese and Dutch settlers, and so on. The ethnic identity and the supposed racial and cultural distinctiveness of each of these nationalities is validated by simplistic unilinear theories of migration and unmixed descent. Official demographic publications reproduce these ideas in their purest form. An official museum monograph, *The Physical Anthropology of Ceylon*, published as late as the 1960's, using once popular but now discredited anthropometric methods, gives authoritative sanction to the existence of distinct bio-ethnic (i.e. 'racial') differences between the different communities, relating them to historical antecedents. Even contemporary archaeological and historical scholarship still tends, in one way or another, to validate these views and to see migratory origins and bio-ethnic differences as persistent and dominant trends in historical evolution. Even refutations of these ideas, such as the view that the Sinhalese are originally Dravidians, or that the Tamils are—at least partially—Tamilized Sinhalese, tend to operate within the same paradigm.

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the peopling of Sri Lanka and the formation of its ethnic variety have been an extremely complex process which we do not fully understand as yet. It is not only the new facts which are emerging but new approaches to and interpretation of the available evidence, which compel us to look at historical and cultural processes in a fresh light. In general terms, we are beginning to pay much greater attention to the internal dynamics of historical development and to formulate the relationship between internal and



external factors in a more scientific manner; to see that patterns both of *integration* and *differentiation* exist between ethnic groups; that the process of cultural formation is not determined by the various constituent elements of a cultural complex wherever those cultural elements may come from originally, but by the specific social needs of a particular community in a given place and time, and the creative syntheses which that community generates as a result of its own internal dynamism.

The question of *source* or *origin*, therefore, is not a historical puzzle which we have to solve by looking for clues in distant or even in not so distant places, but which has to be resolved by reference to internal processes of development, in the first place, and external migrations and influences only secondarily.

We may apply this emerging paradigm in different ways to any of the major or minor nationalities which we find in Sri Lanka and to the various phases of historical development. We will limit ourselves here to a brief consideration of the prehistoric and protohistoric period and to the beginnings of civilization in the early phases of the historic period.

We have today an increasing knowledge of the pre-and protohistory of Sri Lanka, although we are still very far away from anything like a full understanding of the prehistoric situation. There are, however, three distinct conditions or stages of development that we confront, each of these with its own patterns and problematics, which we may consider in turn.

The first of these is that of prehistoric man who lived in Sri Lanka for hundreds and thousands of years before the historic era, spread out quite extensively over the low lying plains and high plateaus of the island. How far back this goes is as yet uncertain, although rare fossil remains of *homo-erectus*, an extinct form of modern man (i.e. Balangoda man) and uncertain finds of crude paleolithic implements, all indicate that the human occupation of the island may date from periods that have to be measured in geological time. We are on much safer ground in dealing with later, post-Pleistocene prehistory,

dating from about 10,000 to 15,000 B.C., from which time extensive collections of stone implements have been found. These are mostly of a Late Stone Age or Mesolithic type and are associated primarily with a hunter-gatherer way of life, not dissimilar in principle from that of the latter day Vadda peoples. Clearly, these stone implements are related to similar artefacts found in Peninsular India and elsewhere but show a degree of local specialization. They have been described as being 'much more highly developed and specialised' than similar assemblages in mainland South Asia. Although migration must certainly have played some part in these developments, we may well pose the question, from these preliminary findings, whether migration of technique was not more important than the migration of peoples and whether technical adoption and local adaptation and improvement were not the most significant factors in the territorial expansion and demographic increase of the prehistoric populations of the island.

Prehistory, therefore, is becoming an increasingly important aspect of our understanding of the growth of human settlement in the island and of the process of ethnic formation. Thus, what we may call the 'Pre-Vijayan' era becomes an integral and important part of Sri Lankan history.

The next major development in this historical process is the transformation from a nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life to one that was based on food production and settled village existence. Hitherto, two major hypotheses have dominated our interpretation of these protohistoric developments. *One*, that waves of so-called 'Aryan' migrants came to Sri Lanka by sea from the western and eastern regions of north India, bringing with them the rudiments of plough-based agriculture, irrigation, the use of iron and also the basic elements of what was to later develop into the Sinhala Language. Spreading along the river valleys, they established their village settlements throughout a greater part of the island. *Two*, that these iron age settlers either replaced or assimilated the existing prehistoric peoples of the island and gradually but rapidly developed their economy and culture into the civilization of the historical period. A further aspect of this hypothetical reconstruction and one that is not



often featured in the standard historical writings is the presence of South Indian or Dravidian migrants who figure at best in minor roles or as 'alien' invaders. Critical modifications to this picture deal largely with ascribing a more important role to the South Indian elements without basically questioning the primacy of the 'migration hypothesis.' The major source and still dominant expression of this migrationist view is the story of the coming of Vijaya and the ensuing eventsas recorded in the Pali Chronicles. The accuracy of the chronicles when dealing with events of the *historical* period have given a special validity to their accounts of the *protohistoric* era. However, despite, the weight of popular and semi-scholarly acceptance of the Vijaya story, most modern historians are agreed that the story itself is purely legendary, a myth of origin, synthesized from various early Indian legends and to be understood in terms of the historiographical objectives of the chroniclers rather than as actual historical records. The same historians, however, still tend to accept the basic premise of the Vijaya story that civilization in Sri Lanka had its origins in the settlement and expansion of migrant colonists from the Indian mainland.

A fresh look at this problem has to start from the premise that our knowledge of the developments of the protohistoric era and the beginnings of history is as yet inadequate for us to come to anything like a preliminary level of understanding, let alone a definitive conclusion. Our present ideas are based solely on literary traditions and the linguistic evidence of the proto-Sinhala language contained in the Brahmi inscriptions. All other forms of evidence currently utilized are of dubious value. It is only the recovery of the material remains of the prehistoric and protohistoric periods by archaeological excavations, the further investigation of literary, linguistic and ethnological evidence by acceptable modern methods, and comparative studies of Sri Lankan, Indian and Southeast Asian material, that can lead us to a better understanding of the actual historical developments.

Some of the new lines of investigation that scholars are now beginning to pursue are worth looking at, if only

briefly, because they show that we are quite justified in challenging the existing framework of historical belief. We have already referred to the broad outline of the prehistoric situation and it is worth observing that the most recent excavations seem to confirm earlier hunches that at least some of the mesolithic hunter-gatherers had begun to practise primitive methods of food production. This is testified to by finds of food grains amongst the occupation debris at one of the major mesolithic sites in the country and also by changes in vegetation brought about in certain areas, possibly as a result of prehistoric chena cultivation.

This seems to indicate the possibility that the transition from nomadic hunting to settled food production may have already begun amongst the prehistoric peoples of the island independently of migratory intervention, at least in its early stages.

Another line of investigation has dealt with the skeletal remains of the so-called Balangoda man, a group of early inhabitants of the Balangoda district, dating from about the 5th or 6th millennium B. C. Comparative analysis of the data with later material from historical and contemporary populations has shown 'a biological continuum' between the prehistoric and historic peoples. Similarly, blood group and genetic studies seem to indicate that Sri Lankans occupy a place or a scale of genetic distance somewhere between Southern India and Southeast Asia and much closer to the former than to the latter—or in other words, they display a racial mix quite appropriate to the island's geographical location. Whatever the geographical and ethnic origins of the early Sri Lankans, historical probabilities alone make it unlikely they were a homgeneous migrant group. Considering the complex processes involved in the peopling of an island of this size, with a long history of human habitation, it is most likely that the Sri Lankans were as heterogeneous in the prehistoric and protohistoric past as they are today.

A further area of study — of increasing importance in contemporary archaeological interests — concerns the megalithic



culture complexces which has been found in many parts of the island, but which seems to have a high degree of concentration in the northern and eastern dry zone. Some attention has been paid to these megalithic monuments in the past two or three decades, but in recent years there has been an increasing research interest in this field. It seems clear that this megalithic culture is associated with the use or even the introduction of iron, with fairly advanced forms of pottery, with agriculture and irrigation based settlement and also possibly with a considerable degree of social differentiation. A display in the National Museum in Colombo shows the possible links between the megalithic peoples, the early Brahmi inscriptions and the village irrigation works. This would seem to indicate that the spread of this megalithic culture may well hold important clues to the agricultural transformation that was taking place in the protohistoric era, probably in its later rather than its early phases, and also to the beginnings of the historical civilization.

A study of the internal development and variations of the Sri Lankan megalithic culture (s) and a comparison between the local megalithic assemblages and those of southern and central India, on the one hand, and of Southeast Asia, on the other, will give us a useful index to the character and dynamism of the historical processes at work in Sri Lanka during the protohistoric and early historic period. It will also provide us with an insight into the relationship between Sri Lanka and Peninsular India, where the largest concentration of Indian megalithic sites is to be found. Once again, the question of the migration of culture (ideas, techniques, etc.) as contradistinct to the migration of peoples will be the major problematic that arises in the study of this material.

The leap from protohistory to history in the earliest phase of the historical period (3rd century B.C. to 1st century A.C.) is marked by the dramatic appearance of the Brahmi inscriptions. These are associated, on the one hand, with cultural phenomena, such as the spread of the proto-Sinhala language and the rise of Buddhism and, on the other, with socio-economic and technological developments — the extensive proliferation of wet rice cultivation and tank irrigation and the appearance of distinct

forms of social differentiation. The greater part of the inscriptions seem to be the work of an emerging elite, who are clearly the owners and controllers of wealth and the dispensers of political power and religious patronage. What is of specific interest to us here is the significance this has in relation to the peopling and settlement of the island and the emergence of a Sinhalese *ethnos*.

What these Brahmi inscriptions indicate is a sudden upsurge of historical development, a kind of revolutionary transformation, one of whose distinct features is the widespread use of the proto-Sinhala language. The extraordinary homogenity of the language found in these inscriptions and their extensive spread throughout the agricultural settlements in the island seem at first glance to support the view that they were the result of a sudden wave of migration of an at least linguistically homogenous cultural group. But looked at more realistically and in terms of the pre-and protohistoric developments that we have been discussing, we can also interpret this as a culmination or turning point in the processes that were at work in the protohistoric period, the end-product of several centuries of historical development.

What is significant and at the same time puzzling is that the proto-Sinhala language of these inscriptions belongs to the broad group of North Indian prakrits, a branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Along with the closely related language of the Maldivian islands, which has a similar character and chronology, it represents the southernmost extension of the Indo-European language family, separated from the main block of such languages in north India by the large Dravidian linguistic region that covers the southern half of the Indian Peninsula. Current linguistic studies indicate that the Sinhala language both in its early and later phases of evolution has a special character. While displaying affinities with both western and eastern Indian prakrits, it still retains its own separate identity; i. e. it is related to but quite distinct from the Indian prakrits, on the one hand, and profoudly influenced by, though different from, the Dravidian languages, on the other. In short,



its *synthetic* character and local *specialization*, even as early as the 3rd century B. C., are of a high degree.

The question we must then ask ourselves is how do we interpret this development in the absence of any other archaeological evidence — and also, what questions should we then pose in the archaeological research that we are to undertake, now and in the future? Is this language the product of one or more waves of migrants who brought with them the rudiments of a mixture of prakritic dialects which coalesced into a homogenous language during the proto-historic phase? Or is it an overlay created by a migrant elite who were also wholly or partially coincident with the ruling strata that emerged in the later phases of protohistoric development? Or, a third possibility, is it the acquisition or proliferation by the leadership of an emerging civilization of a *synthesizing* language, whose constituent elements have been acquired either internally or externally from quantitatively insignificant but linguistically advanced migrants, thereby improving communications and uniting heterogenous groups? Clearly this linguistic process was accompanied or preceded by a similarly homogenous synthesis in the development of material culture, methods of agricultural production, social relations and political institutions and paralleled by the adoption and growth of an advanced religion, Buddhism.

The significance of these developments in relation to the question we are discussing here is that they marked the historical beginnings of the Sinhalese people as a distinct *ethnos*, whatever their origins and whatever ethnic groups and cultural elements went into their undoubtedly composite formation. This formation, as we have seen, may well have included south Indian megalithic culture, in which migration would surely have played some role, as well as north Indian linguistic connections, which could not have taken place without direct migratory contact. But, what is more important than the concern with *origins* and *sources*, is the task of discovering the dynamic *internal* processes that led to this creative synthesis. It is archaeology alone, on a scientific basis, that can accomplish that task, for ultimately it is

only the retrieval and interpretation of the material remains of the cultures themselves that were involved in this process that can establish, even in a fragmentary way, what actually took place.

At the same time, to speak of the emergence of a Sinhalese *ethnos* requires at least two important qualifications. One, that this does not necessarily mean ethnic *self-identity* and, the other, that it does not mean the completion but rather the early beginnings of the social and cultural formation of the Sinhala people. In a paper presented in this collection, Gunawardena warns us about projecting modern ethnic self-consciousness back into historical times and gives us an extensive analysis of the significance of the term *Sinhala*. He shows us that the term seems to have had a narrow application in early times, referring initially only to a small ruling stratum or kin group, claiming descent from the companions of the mythical Vijaya. It was only later extended to their own immediate followers and finally to the entire people over whom they ruled. Again, it is important to keep in mind that the ethnic composition of the Sinhalese, both in a cultural and also a bio-ethnic and demographic sense, was not the product of a single historical period or a unilinear process, but one that took place throughout a long history. Even in recent times we have evidence of the entry and absorption of various groups and communities, both migrant and indigenous, and a variety of cultural elements into the changing and evolving character of the Sinhala - speaking people and the culture associated with them. There is no doubt that the Tamil contribution to this has been of considerable importance throughout history, while at the same time it lies to the credit of the Sinhalese that in a small and relatively insignificant island at the southern extremity of the Indian Peninsula, they produced a distinctive culture and civilization through a continuing process of creative synthesis. The patterns of integration and differentiation, which are demonstrated in past epochs, are still active and the challenge which faces our society today is to understand and master the dynamic



and progressive content of these developments and apply them to the problems of the day.

The same methodology and analysis can be applied to the other nationalities in Sri Lankan, whether their appearance on the stage of Sri Lanka history was coeval with or subsequent to that of the Sinhala-speaking people. The most obvious example of this is that of the Sri Lankan Tamils who have shared this island with the Sinhalese, in one way or another, from early historic and, probably, protohistoric times. The existence of people with a distinct Tamil ethnic identity from a very early period is evidenced in the Brahmi inscriptions. An equally significant connection is that the material culture of the protohistoric and early historic periods as well as other non-material cultural phenomena show clear relationships between Sri Lanka and southern India. Comparative studies of the material culture associated with the megalithic complex as well as of the megalithic burial practices, themselves, and also of the irrigation technology, agricultural techniques and both plant and animal domestication in the two regions will certainly give us a clearer picture of this relationship. The proximity of south India and the narrowneess of the Indo-Sri Lanka straits must certainly have provided easy access to migratory and trading contact in pre-historic times, as in later history.

There are many references in Sri Lankan history to Tamils and Tamil communities, not only as the invaders or usurpers, in which role they may be frequently portrayed, but also as patrons of Buddhism, as guardians of the Tooth-Relic, as mercenaries and as partisans deeply involved in the internal politics of the island, and as merchants and traders. There is also ample evidence, as Liyanagamage has recently pointed out, of the close—but often forgotten relationship maintained between Sri Lankan Buddhists and Tamil Buddhists in south India. A major rolein the emergence and consolidation of a Sri Lankan Tamil *ethnos* is played by the formation of a Tamil kingdom in the north from the 13th to the early 17th century and by the presence of significant Tamil elements in the Vanni principalities during the period from the 13th to the 19th century.

Once again, patterns of convergence and divergence, of integration and differentiation, and also of homogeneity and heterogeneity are apparent in these developments showing that the history of the Tamil peoples of Sri Lanka, like that of the Sinhalese, is not a simple unilinear process.

What is true of the Sinhalese and the Tamils is also applicable to the other major nationality, the Muslims; or, in a somewhat different way to much smaller ethnic groups such as the Burghers and even to that large community of more recent migrants, the Indian Tamils of the tea producing areas of the central highlands. The Muslim presence in this island dates back, again on the basis of epigraphic and literary evidence, to the 9th or 10th century. An important role was played by the Muslims in the development of trade and commerce and also in what we may call the second *urbanisation*, after the 13th century, when port cities and urban settlements came to form a significant aspect of the Sri Lankan economy and polity. In the coures of this urbanisation, the evolution of the Muslim *ethnos* took specific local forms in which internal development seems to have played as or more significant a part as migration and other external factors. Similarly, the third *urbanisation* and the growth of modern middle class modes of life, which took place under colonial domination, saw a major role played by the Burghers, the importance of whose contribution was often in inverse proportion to their numbers. The distinctive character of their urban 'sub-culture' owes as much to its development within the Sri Lankan context and its synthesis with indigenous elements as to its exogenous origins. As for the Indian Tamils—who range from numerous small groups of varied geographical social and economic origins, to the large-scale estate communities—they present a clearly observable if only incipient example of the patterns of migration, settlement, localisation and synthesis that must have recurred, in different ways, throughout the history of the peopling and settlement of the island.

Looked at in this way, the history of ethnic formation in Sri Lanka can be seen as a complex process involving, in



the first instance, the convergence of various pre-and protohistoric developments into the formation of the major ethnic group associated with the evolution of Sri Lankan history and culture, the Sinhalese; and, in the second instance, the parallel or mostly subsequent emergence in historic times of other major or minor communities; third, in modern times, the convergence of this historically complex multiplicity of ethnic groups into a larger, more comprehensive, if still incipient, *Sri Lankan nation.* Despite the survival of traditional ethnic differentiation and of contradiction and conflict between ethnic groups, there is in modern Sri Lanka society and culture, a distinct similarity of cultural patterns, from area to area and group to group covering both material and spiritual realms and across ethnic barriers. Although we live at a time which may seem to be one dominated by heated inter-ethnic contradictions and endemic ethnic and caste rivalries, the unities that have been established in the daily life of Sri Lanka society in the late 20th century clearly show a pathway to the future. A study of Sri Lankan history, stripped of its myths and distortions and free of communalist bias. *on one side or the other* can do much to contribute to the historic process of the formation of an integrated, polyethnic modern nation.

# The Formation of Sri Lankan Culture: Reinterpretation of Chronicle and Archaeological Material[1],[2]

Susantha Goonatilaka

The popular ideology held by historians and lay persons alike was that Sri Lanka productive forces as well as its culture (Sinhala Buddhism) were generated largely by physical transfer of a population of North India to Sri Lanka. This paper interprets recent archaeological finds as well as Mahawamsa descriptions to indicate that productive forces (economy) were largely a product of changes within Sri Lanka in common with some South Indian ones. The introduction of Sinhala language as well as Buddhism as a classical colonisation process was a necessary outcome of the changes in these internal productive forces.

Early history of Sri Lankan culture (and for that matter, of Sri Lanka society as a whole) is highly dependent on material from the chronicles although this is occasionally collaborated by epigraphic and other evidence. The 'history' of the period prior to the 2nd century B. C. is largely dependent

1. This paper in essence constitutes the first part of a longer paper prepared for a UNESCO sponsored symposium on traditional culture held in Colombo in 1977. However, as the symposium dealt only with the contemporary scene, this part of the paper dealing with the formation of Sri Lanka culture – which to me was the most challenging – was not discussed. The paper was discussed more fully at a meeting of the Social Scientists Asscociation in February 1979. The final part of this paper – A Concluding Note –

on chronicle material specially as to the introduction of Buddhism and Sinhala language to form what later came to be called Sinhala Buddhist culture. Early Sri Lankan history thus rested until very recent times on reading into and interpretation of the near mythical references in the Mahavamsa. Hard archaeological evidence prior to the introduction of Buddhism has hardly been sought for until very recent times. This paper attempts to summarise recent archaeological evidence of the early history and thereby partially reconstruct the economic and social system in that era. With this firm data as background, the paper also attempts to re-interpret the descriptions in the chronicles as to the introduction of both Sinhala language and Buddhism to Sri Lanka and hence indirectly the formation of 'Sinhala Buddhist' Culture.

## Archaeological Evidence

Artefacts and remains of stone tool-using man have been found in several sites in Sri Lanka, with the site at Bellan-Bandi Pelassa being dated by thermoluminiscent testing of associated artefacts at circa 4500 B. C. (Wintle and Oakley, 1972). Excavations at a carefully stratified basis at the Gedige area of Anuradhapura (S. Deraniyagala 1972)) has also brought out artefacts associated with this culture indicating thereby that this culture was widespread in the country. But it is not with stone age man or his cultural products to whom one could

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is an outcome of some questions raised at that meeting. I wish to thank participants of this seminar for raising some interesting questions and giving valuable comments.

2. The paper is a development of some of the author's previous views on the sociology of culture (Goonatilake. 1975 a, 1975 b, 1976 a, 1976 b). I am indebted to those who commented on and criticised these papers. In this particular piece I am grateful to my wife Hema Goonatilake for valuable help in my understanding of and alerting me to Pali, Sanskrit and (old) Sinhala sources.

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possibly assign several cave paintings (S. Deraniyagala 1971 p. 38) that we are interested in; it is with the culture associated with settled agriculture.

Settled agriculture especially those associated with tank irrigation is often considered to be an introduction of the 'Sinhalese culture' that was brought by the waves of speakers of a North Indian dialect. However, there is considerable evidence both direct and indirect that settled irrigated agriculture arose before, and independent of, the coming of the North Indian language speakers.

Possible indirect literary evidence is in the Mahavamsa story of the Buddha's three visits to Sri Lanka to local kingdoms at least half a century before the latter's story about the coming of Vijaya. The references to such kingdoms makes one speculate on the presence of settled agriculture giving a sufficient surplus (which hunting and gathering is not capable of) for the upkeep of a kingdom. Such agriculture would have been based on irrigation as two of the three kingdoms, namely Mahiyangana and Nagadipa coincide with the red soil dry zone of the country. The third, Kelaniya, is in the heavy rainfall area. (The latter is an interesting anomaly, both in this mythical history as well as in actual history – it was in the 2nd century B. C. the seat of Kelanitissa – in that it is outside main red soil dry zone area).

Further, the Vijaya story as well as other sources which could be dated to times almost contemporaneous with Vijaya point also to the existence of other economic activities which could not have existed without settled agriculture. The incident in the Vijaya story relating to Kuveni describes her activity of spinning of cotton. References to Sri Lanka's export trade during these early times, in gems and pearls, exist in Kautilya's *Arthasastra* and the *Mahabharatha* (referred to in Ellawala 1969 p. 138). Both these economic activities of spinning cotton and export trade in gems could not have existed, we should note, without the primary activity of settled agriculture.

The earliest indication of settled agriculture that we have some direct evidence of, is in the 'Megalithic' culture

whose remains have been found scattered in many parts of Sri Lanka. The existing sites as indicated in a map in the Colombo Museum shows a spread of these sites (Pomparippu, Gurugalhinna, Katiraveli, Podiyogampola, Walave Basin) in the red brown earth soil region of the dry zone of the country. The stratigraphic excavation at the Gedige area in Anuradhapura (S. Deraniyagala 1972) indicates that 'artificial reservoirs of water existed at Anuradhapura from the period represented by stratum 2 onwards' (ibid. p. 159). Stratum 1 was associated with artefacts of the stone age and comparable with the 'Balangoda Culture' of 4500 B. C. whilst stratum 3 had artefacts 'whose closest cultural correlative is the early iron age 'Megalithic' culture of peninsular India which is datable to the 800 - 100 B. C.' (ibid p. 159). The dating of this particular site is by strata and no dating by physical means - say by photoluminiscence testing of the pottery available at the site-has been made and therefore we cannot say with precision the exact dates of the megalithic culture layer, or the one associated with irrigation in stratum 2. But within this limitation we can state with Deraniyagala that at least by the period represented by stratum 3 a. which was before the advent of 'Mauryan traditions' in the 3rd century B. C. the inhabitants cultivated rice through tank irrigation and were culturally closest to the early iron age 'megalithic' man of middle and South India, although certain culture traits were characteristic of the North'. (ibid p. 50)

The characteristics of this megalithic culture common to both Sri Lanka and South India are well known. 'In one respect the settlements differed from each other; burial practices and funerary monuments varied. The variety includes dolmens, cists, stone squares and urn burials' (Senaratna 1969 p. 30). Further, the culture was metal using, the pottery was of a black and red type and 'a settlement had four distinct areas; a habitation area, a cemetery, a tank and fields. Irrigation was practised and the introduction of this technique to these regions is now thought to be the work of these people' (ibid).

It is in these settlements associated with the South Indian megalithic culture, (which were from available physical evidence,



practising an irrigated agriculture - before the so-called 'coming of the Aryans') that we have to look for the first beginnings of our traditional culture, which, as is well recognised, is intimately tied with the growth and spread of irrigation in this country. The culture associated with this village tank based irrigation had also houses made of wattle and daub, (Deraniyagala 1972) used iron and pottery, (Senaratna 1969) had implements like grinding stones (the latter being found even in the late stone age of Sri Lanka) and very probably had wooden spoons, and artefacts associated with weaving. An important aspect of significance indicating the belief system of this culture were its funerary monuments. "Associated with these megaliths have been found 'urnfields in which the remains of the dead have been buried in large pots, together with the offerings made to them contained in smaller pots." (Paranavithana 1967 p. 8). Clearly the burial practices have a religious significance, as well as do the megaliths associated with it and here one finds a close identification of the irrigation tank and the religious / belief centre, a direct parallel between the dagoba and the tank of the later 'Sinhala-Buddhist' times.

The physical basis for early Sri Lanka culture was in the village tanks associated with this South Indian megalithic culture. The major socio-economic changes in the next millenium and half are intimately related to the expansion, interconnection and consolidation of this incipient irrigation system so as to give an increased surplus from the land. And it is within this growth of the consolidation which is well documented that we have to see the crucible as it were of traditional Sri Lanka culture.

In the absence of extensive archaeological excavation there is no general indicator of how widespread the 'megalithic' irrigation was. In the absence of excavations of tank bunds that could date them we do not have a direct physical indicator (the references in Mahavamsa to the founding of a few important tanks is an indirect reference to the existence of some tanks) about the extent of expansion of the irrigation system in the pre-Christian era. Yet in the pre-Christian

epigraphic remains we have a good indirect indicator of the extent of this spread assuming that the epigraphic remains reflect the existence of settled tank irrigated agriculture. This is a fairly reasonable assumption to make in that a map of the pre-Christian epigraphic remains coincides strongly with the dry zone reddish brown earth soil region of Sri Lanka which is the tank region of the country as is revealed by the tank network that survived to the 19 th century. (An examination of the epigraphic map of Sri Lanka and C. R. Panabokke's soil maps indicate this. Such a comparison has been done in two maps published in October 1975 issue of the *Economic Review*.) Evidence exists to indicate that by the dawn of the Christian era the tank culture has spread throughout the country. These were very probably a collection of irrigation units 'nothing larger than the village Tank' (Nicholas 1960 p. 44) and we could reasonably speculate that most such tanks were built on technology associated with the megalithic South Indian culture.

With time these tanks grow larger, streams are dammed and an irrigation network covers the whole dry zone region. The 1st century sees the steps towards major tanks and the construction of canals as long as thirty miles (ibid). The first collosal reservoirs are assigned to King Mahasena in the 3rd century, with these activities continuing in the 4th and 5th centuries (thus Kalawewa with a bund 3½ miles long, 40 feet high and irrigating 7,000 acres; and the great canal Jaya Ganga, 54 miles in length carrying water to Anuradhapura). These activities continued in the 6th and 7th centuries with, for example, the building activities of Aggabodhi II almost rivalling those of Mahasena and with the total length of the major canals in the 7th century being over 250 miles (ibid). The 8th, 9th and 10th centuries were a period of apparent affluence, but little new irrigation works are adduced to this era. (ibid). The next spurt in irrigation activity is in the 11th century by Parakrama Bahu, after whose reign begins a slow collapse of the hydraulic systems due to warfare and other reasons and from the 13th century a drift of the socio-economic centre to the South West of the island occurs.

It is the 'hydraulic' civilization which arose in the roughly 1500 years upto the 13th century that nurtured traditional



Sri Lankan culture. The most significant socio-economic impact of the extensive growth of the irrigation system was that it increased the available yield from the land and thereby the disposable surplus available for disbursement. The manner in which this surplus was used gives us important clues to the socio-economic system of the time, specially the nature of its class relations. How the surplus was used we can know to some extent by the living standards of the peasants and others.

We know that until very recent times the use of tiles and bricks was restricted to those related to royalty and the church (Pieris: 1922 p. 23) and that consequently all houses of the peasantry were wattle and daub structures. These were rudimentary and it is very doubtful if the structures changed much from the wattle and daub structures of the megalithic period of which we have evidence (Deraniyagala 1972 p. 58). The basic structure still survives in various parts of the island and was very prevalent in the North Central Province for example before the tile and brick structures spread there during the last fifteen years.

If the living quarters in Sri Lankan classical period were of wattle and daub, what of the other requisites of living, clothes, house-hold items etc. We know that cotton was widely grown in Sri Lanka (Paranavithana 1967 p. 11) and if the Kuveni story is to be believed even from pre-Vijayan times. We also know from sculptural remains and extant paintings that even the royalty of the time used comparatively scanty clothing, with mostly a dhoti around the waist as fitting a hot climate. The peasantry undoubtedly wore a similar type of clothing of probably coarse material and with the average peasant owning only a single change or two of clothing. We know that just like there were social strictures on the types of building allowed to the peasantry there were similar strictures on clothing (the upper half of the body not to be covered by the lower castes for example) a practise that survived till a few decades ago in several parts of the country. If we are to use the Kuveni story as evidence of the use of cotton before 'Vijayan' times, we can hypothesise with a fair degree of reasonableness that the pre-Sinhalese Sri Lankan probably had the same type of dress as the later Sinhalese.

The artefacts used in the home can also be reconstructed from remains of pottery etc. and from extrapolation backward of the possessions of the present day peasantry. Pottery used during this period would have been very similar to the ones used till very recently in Sri Lanka as indicated by a successful classification of ancient pottery (Gunasekera et al. 1971) using existing types; in fact pottery remains at the 'megalithic' site of Pomparippu conforms to some recent traditional types (ibid). (Types of pottery are a good indicator of life styles as well as standards of living; a particular pot being in existence for a more or less specific use, the persistence of a similar type over millenia thus indicates persistence of a similar life style and standard of living,)

At Anuradhapura a folk museum has been put up recently which has collected items of everyday use in the area which are indicative of the life style of the pre-modern type. The museum classification does not differentiate on the basis of class, for example, the Serakkali, the eating stand on which the bowl of rice was placed and whose use was only restricted to the upper strata being kept alongside other artefacts. But with observations in the life style of the peasantry of even very recent times we can draw the following items from the museum as indicative of their possessions: pots, wooden spoons, coconut scrapers, winnowing pan, mats, wicker baskets, betel pouch, betel cutter, gourd containers, knives, mammoties, axes, grinding stones, ropes etc. From our knowledge of descriptions during early historic times, and available remains in the form of pottery and ironware it is very unlikely that the life possessions of the early historical peasant would have differed much from this. It might possibly have been marginally lower or higher but by not much. The possessions of 'megalithic' man whom we know used iron, possessed pottery, had artefacts like grinding stones and probably used cotton would not have differed very much.*

* In parentheses we should also note that the material possessions at another museum, the Veddah exhibit at Colombo museum, indicate that life possessions of the historic and recent peasant would not have differed much from that of



If then the life possessions of the peasant have not increased, except perhaps marginally, from megalithic through the Sinhalese 'hydraulic' times, where has the surplus generated by the improved irrigation technology gone? One answer would be that it was all absorbed by a population explosion, but this is unsatisfactory as we know that there were quantum jumps in the technology with rapid increases in irrigated land at certain times which would have certainly overtaken the population increase.

Not all the population in the land was involved in agriculture; there were artisans like metal smiths, potters, brick and tile makers, workers in stone and carpenters. We also know from the possessions the peasant had, that only a part of these craftsmen could have created utensils for the peasant. Thus the output of brick and tile makers fed only the courts and the temples as probably did the major output of such persons as painters, sculptors etc. In addition to these non-agricultural personnel, the agricultural surplus also supported the court, officials and the monks, the latter in Anuradhapura alone numbering in the tens of thousands.

A quite significant part of the surplus was spent especially indirectly through the support of stone masons etc. in setting up the massive edifices and buildings for the temples and the court. The Mahavamsa and the present surface remains provide adequate evidence of this.

The first edifice in this genre was the Thuparama stupa which with a diameter at its base of 59 ft. was built in the 3rd century B. C. During the next two centuries the stupas reach

the historic veddah. The veddah artefacts at the Colombo museum display include bows and arrows, axes, ropes, sandals made of skin, gourd containers, wicker baskets, mats, betel bags and pouches, coconut scrapers, winnowing pan, coconut spoons, pots, bead strings, ola books and a toy cart. This is a list almost identical to that of the peasant except for the tools of livelihood; bows and arrows in the case of the Veddah, mammoties and ploughs in the case of the peasant.

massive proportions, in Dutugemunu's time, the Mirisavetiya having a diameter of 108 feet at the base and Ruwanvelisaya having 289 feet diameter with a height of 300 feet. The Abhayagiri and the Jetavana built in succeeding centuries had diameters at the base respectively 355 feet and 367 feet and heights of 350 feet and 400 feet. These stupas were built of solid brick masonry. Most of the non-peasant dwellings were of wood and literary works refer to the 'splendid mansions of kings and nobles' (Paranavitana p. 16). Dwelling quarters of monks were also imposing and generally of wood structures, the most well known of these being the nine storey structure Lovamahapaya. In addition we know from structural remains that these edifices were ornamented with sculpture and bas reliefs, often having a religious significance and sometimes reaching collosal dimensions as in the Buddhist sculptures of Aukana, Buduruwagala, Gal Vihare etc. Similarly both court and temple had carefully done paintings.

Thus in the division of the benefits that accrued from the improved agricultural system we see a sharp cleavage in the class structure. A continuing period of accumulation at Anuradhapura and other centres benefitted the upper classes of this feudal civilization whilst the peasantry lived at roughly the same living standard with perhaps only a marginal increase in their standard of living. We also know that the surplus was generated without the use of much organised violence and without the extensive use of slaves – slaves and serfs (praveni dasas) existed in the thousands even in Buddhist temples but in comparison with the total population it was not significant as a factor in the accumulation process. The social cleavage extended to all aspects of life and consumption items. We know that Sri Lanka exported items in the luxury category like 'precious stones, conch shells, tortoise shells and ivory' imported luxury items like gold, silver, glass, ceramic and porcelain etc. (Paranavithana ibid p. 12). The exchanges that occured in the import and export trade were exchanges principally between the consumption items of the affluent classes of Sri Lanka and those of other countries. The literary references are replete with references also to the luxurious and easy life led by those associated with the 'feudal' centre.



The question that has to be framed is how and by what mechanisms were this differential access to resources and social cleavage made acceptable to the mass of the peasantry, who were the principal producers of this surplus. There is evidence that the legitimisation of this social cleavage at the level of royalty was done specially in the later centuries of the hydraulic civilization by a particular cult of kingship. Thus Hema Goonatilake (1974) has traced the growth of the cult of Bodhisattva as an ideology of kingship in Sri Lanka and shown how the rule by royalty was made acceptable. It is within the framework of this social cleavage as well as the use of symbols including the arts in the maintenance of this system, that clues to the nature of our traditional culture have to be found.

## The Introduction of Buddhism and Sinhala Language

Customarily the beginnings of our traditional culture meaning those that have a bearing on arts and crafts, are placed at the era of the coming of both the Sinhalese language and Buddhism. Both these events we should note occured at a time when the irrigation system was in the process of consolidation, giving rise to a fair surplus, that in turn could support a royal court. We have seen how with the further consolidation of the irrigation system in the following centuries visible symbols of this surplus accumulation at the centre in the form of gigantic edifices emerged. The two great events of the cultural history of this country, namely the introduction and spread of Sinhala Language and the Buddhist religion can be related to the time when the irrigation system was giving a sufficient surplus for a central kingdom to emerge. What is the nature of the relationships of the emergent centralised kingdom with these two broad cultural elements? An examination of the formal introduction of Buddhism in the 3rd century B. C. for which much historical detail exists, (unlike details of the introduction of the Sinhala language) provides us interesting insights into this process.

Buddhism was officially introduced by Devanampiyatissa from Asoka's India through the latter's son Mahinda. We know from the Mahavamsa the events that preceded this introduction

and the nature of the relationship that existed between the two countries. The evidence suggests a strong patron-client relationship between the Indian and his Sri Lankan counterpart. Thus Devanampiyatissa's envoys bear precious gifts to Asoka, although not perhaps signifying tribute, at least signifying the latter's supremacy in the region. Asoka responds in return by sending gifts (interestingly enough indicative about the nature of the Buddhist kingdom, the gifts include a 'maiden in the flower of her youth': Mahavamsa XI). The gifts significantly included 'all that was needful for consecrating a king' and whilst sending a message about Asoka's adoption of Buddhism and recommending Tissa to do likewise he also advised Tissa's ministers to 'consecrate my friend yet again as king, (ibid). Asoka's envoys who returned with Tissa's ministers put this admonition into practise and these envoys 'most faithful to their king (Asoka) consecrated the ruler of Lanka, whose (first) consecration had been held earlier' (ibid). After thus getting consecrated once again by the envoys of the powerful neighbour Tissa also took the same prefix Devanampiya ('Friend of the gods' - ibid) as his mentor.

Mahinda who brought official Buddhism to Sri Lanka leaves no doubt about the particular relationship between the two kings when he discusses the most opportune moment to come to Sri Lanka for conversion purposes. He states 'In that great festival of consecration *commanded by my father** shall the great king Devanampiyatissa take part, and he shall know the splendour of the three things, when he has heard it from the envoys.' (ibid xiii) The actual conversion story and the events thereafter are of the overawing of the king by apparent supernatural events and the testing of the king on his intellectual abilities and the subsequent conversion of the royal court and nobility.

It would be over - simplistic to suggest that the conversion of the king and the royal court was only a cultural imposition on a small ruler by his overlord. This aspect we may call after Joseph Needham, the external dynamic, but there were

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* emphasis mine



equally important internal dynamics for the adoption of the religion. We had earlier indicated that this was a time when 'hydraulic' civilization was in the process of consolidation and a surplus was growing that could support a royal court. We also know that Devanampiyatissa sent gifts ('tribute' one could even say), to Asoka, was 'commanded' to be consecrated by the latter in spite of being already consecrated and changed his name to Devanampiya, all of which acts clearly indicate that Tissa was seeking legitimization for his rule. That is, he was seeking means to consolidate at a level of ideology his hold on the country. It is within this context of a means of consolidating power by acts of legitimacy that one has also to view his acceptance of Buddhism which was recommended by his mentor Asoka. In this sense acceptance of Buddhism, is-apart from the intrinsic merits and truths of the religion-a means of providing justification for secular power, and this marriage of the state with religious ideology is a theme that echoes through the subsequent centuries.

The fact that the marriage was at least partially unconnected with the truths and otherwise of the religion and that it was adopted as a unifying cultural product of a powerful neighbour is illustrated by many 'un-Buddhistic' (or almost anti-Buddhistic) elements that were given expression in its manifestation in Sri Lanka. Thus Buddhism in being introduced did not in fact disturb many of the existing social institutions of feudalism whilst on the other hand it tended to bolster them by legitimising the existing rule. Thus, on the completion of the Thuparama, 'the women of the royal household, the nobles, ministers, townspeople and all the country folk brought each their offering' (Mahavamsa XVII) indicating that not only the existing social structure survived but was strengthened by Buddhism. In fact even the dwellings of monks, the viharas, were named to take into account their social origins based on their class and caste affiliations, thus Issarasamanaka for the monks from noble families and Vessagiriya for those belonging to the Vaisya caste (Mahavamsa XX).

The Sri Lanka example of the relationship between the state and religion is in contrast to the key Indian royal

figures in Buddhism namely Buddha and Asoka. The former 'ran away' from state power and tended to undermine some of the underpinnings of that society, like the caste structure. Asoka similarly turned away from brutal secular power '*Digvijaya*' and turned to '*Dharmavijaya*'. The contrast occurs more strongly in the second royal figure of Sinhala Buddhism after Devanampiyatissa, namely Dutugemunu. Like Asoka, Dutugemunu is remorseful at the number he has killed in his war but the *Sangha* consoles him by saying that really not thousands were killed but only one and a half, one being a fully ordained monk and the half a lay follower; all others killed were 'unbelievers and men of evil life' and so 'not more to be esteemed than beasts' (ibid). Further, Dutugemunu himself marched in war with a Buddhist relic in his spear, as complete a symbolic act that could occur illustrating the use of religion to defend the state power at the expense of even a fundamental reversal of the teaching.

The echoes of the use of Buddhism in support of a state with a strong social cleavage occurs in the centuries to come. The art, architecture and literature that arose in the coming centuries are to be seen in this light. But before discussing this it is necessary to speculate on the other cultural strand of the country, namely Sinhala language and its introduction for which there is less hard evidence than in the case of the introduction of Buddhism, For the introduction of Sinhala too, one has to view it from within Needham's categories of the internal dynamic and the external dynamic.

We have indicated earlier that settled agriculture based on irrigation in the country was associated in its early stages with the 'megalithic' culture of South India. We also know that the legendary reference to Vijaya speaks of only 700 adventurers (who incidentally obtained wives from South India and not from the North) a much smaller figure than the population that we can assume existed at the time. Small populations of conquerors like say the Romans in Europe we know have left the imprint of their language in the conquered lands. In the case of the Sinhalisation of Sri Lanka it was not a case of Rome-like imperial power establishing its will and



culture sustained over centuries by a carefully laid out military and governmental framework coordinated from a foreign imperial centre. (The imposition of Mauryan culture across most of India belongs to this category.)

In Sri Lanka it was the case of a band of adventurers who established a literal beachhead, and a generation later had only established a few settlements (not to mention that this generation by then was already half North Indian and half South Indian, a process of rapid miscegenation that was to continue in the centuries to come) and who compared to the overall population was still a very small proportion, For a reasonable explanation to Sinhalisation one has to go in a more plausible direction than that of pure military imposition. It is here then one can speculate that the force that helped Sinhalisation was the same internal dynamic as that which helped the adoption of Buddhism, namely a desire to accept a foreign import and obtain legitimacy at the time of an increasing surplus and consequent increasing tendency towards centralisation and the growth of a kingdom.

Although the Sinhalisation process we have sketched above as a cultural imposition to strengthen the secular state sounds plausible, we however know definitely that the subsequent development of culture in the country was within the context of a state with a strong social cleavage. We have already seen how concurrent with the development of the irrigation system massive stupas and similar structures had grown up. There have been suggestions that the stupa had similarities to the burial mounds of later pre-historic period with a possible linear relationship between the two (Senaratna: 1965) from which viewpoint the *gharba* of a *stupa* (as the one at display at Anuradhapura Museum) does not become the cosmological symbol that Paranavithana imagined but a simple burial cist, which it very closely resembles.

Whatever the possible connections of the stupa with the pre-Buddhistic burial mounds these structures have no direct significance to the objective of Buddhism, namely the attainment of *Nirvana*. The massive size the stupas and other monuments

reached in Sri Lanka, suggests comparisons between the use of massive architecture as forms of ideological control in other contexts to overawe the population; examples in the Western context vary from Imperial Rome to Hitler's Germany. The growth of massive stupas and collosal architecture is in keeping with our central thesis of the uses of 'Buddhism' and its associations as a system of state control by the holders of state power. The growth of colossal sculpture is again related to this use of ideology – early Buddhism, which was a movement away from the material, had no statues of the Buddha.*

Apart from the use of stupas and sculpture in this way, other cultural products like architecture including layout and interior decoration, sculpture, painting, music and dancing and literature also divided itself on the basis of the social cleavage. We have already mentioned that architecture demarcated itself strongly into one of the court and those associated with it including the monks and one of the common folk. The former's buildings were formally designed, laid out on formal aesthetic criteria, built of quality materials, of large size with decorative motifs including sculpture and paintings and with almost modern toilet facilities. The grandness of these structures increased dramatically with the increase in surplus. The architecture of the common folk on the other hand were largely mud hovels 'designed' organically out of the interaction of scores of generations

* The use of religions and religious symbolism to bolster state and secular power was also paralleled by an opposite trend, viz. that of the religious authorities to become increasingly tied directly to surplus extracting processes. Initial large grants of land to the Sangha, (usually villages with the associated *villagers* who gave rise to the surplus) turns in later centuries (10th) into heavy monastic landlordism whilst in the Kandyan period one is aware of close blood ties between the holders of secular power and religious power (a custom which one must observe still persists today: (Gunawardena 1965, Evers 1971)



of persons living and struggling against a common physical environment at only subsistence level. No individual sculpture or painting except of the most rudimentary kind adorned their dwellings. Similar contrast existed in lay out and interior decoration. Archaeologically we are aware of the formally laid out parks, e.g. the Ranmasu Uyana or the Sigiriya complex, as well as of sets of buildings with proper inter-relationships to each other as for example the Pollonnaruwa complex around Kirivehera. Non-habitable architecture as we have already noted, specifically the *stupas*, grew to gigantic proportions in Sri Lanka, to serve an ideological function. The king erected these and though he himself visited and enjoyed them, their ideological function in helping to maintain the state structure was that they were seen by and paid homage to by common folk. These factors are again repeated in the sculpture of the land which also often grew to gigantic proportions. Paintings (though extant remains are not so widespread as sculpture due to their rapid physical deterioration) also performed a religious function with the possible exception of Sigiriya which might have been a secular painting for the private benefit of the king and his court.

Personal dress and ornaments also likewise varied according to the class structure. The surviving sculptures as well as paintings depicted those around the court with jewelled head dress, jewellery on arm band and waist, wearing fine clothes with a studied deportment about them. As for the common folk, one can surmise that they lacked a formal coiffure as well as expensive jewellery.

We are aware from sculptural remains and the available literature that dancing and music, very similar in nature to those of our immediate neighbours existed in the royal courts. There was also music and dancing in the ceremonies of the capital, for example those associated with water cutting and the tooth relic; and, in the villages in the ceremonies associated with the harvest. Although dancing and music in the royal court would have been largely for the needs of pleasure, the function of music and dancing in the case of the

public would have been to draw the populace towards the religion. Thus, dancing in a Perahera like that associated with the Temple of the Tooth would have performed this function in contrast to the dancing in the king's court which was for his private pleasure. An exception seems to be festivities connected with harvesting etc which although connected with religious overtones do not necessarily tie with the formal religious system legitimised by the state.

Literature is a vast corpus of material which can be analysed in the light of the framework we have indicated. This is significant specially in the context of the importance that the written word had in transmitting information to the people through the intermediary of village level monks. We will not touch on this in detail except to make the following brief remarks that are indicative of our thinking.

The Mahavamsa, one of Sri Lanka's most proud literary products is a direct offspring of the marriage of state power and Buddhism, being a narrative of both. It is also significant that the appearance of the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa coincide with the maturity of the irrigation network and the growth of large scale dagobas and colossal sculptures. The Mahavamsa leaves no doubt as to its ideological import when it ends every chapter with the exhortation 'Compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious'. This exhortation at the end of a chapter occurs, it should be noted, after some chapters describing in a very *realpolitik* and partisan manner, bloody wars, dynastic feuds and bloodletting on a massive scale, drawing echoes of Kautilya and Machiavelli. It is also significant to note in considering the worldly attitudes of the Mahavihara monks that the Mahavamsa records very avidly the structures put up, lands and other gifts donated to its sect but it is comparatively silent on the detailed spiritual attainment of its members. (The exegetical literature of Buddhism at its early phase is replete with such attainments). The ideological function becomes more explicit with the passage of time as is evidenced in



the excerpts in the footnote below* of exegetical stories from the *Saddhammalankaraya* (1953 ed.) and on the giving of alms to the monks even at the expense of tremendous personal suffering are extolled. This indicates strongly the marriage of this-worldliness and religion and an exhortation for the average listener (that is for the average peasant) to accept the worldly order of things and yield to both Caesar and Christ even his last morsels of food and his last shawl.

We have not looked at in this brief overview of culture either the vicissitudes of content and form in art, the impact of various strands of Buddhism, as well as the dynamics of the cultural processes at the village level apart from listing out the limited access to culture the peasant had. A popular metaphor used today (I believe it is after Martin Wickremasinghe) to describe the socio-economic as well as the cultural life of the village is the twin symbols of the tank and the dagoba. These in our terms respectively signify at the village level the means of sustenance for the villagers (as well as surplus creation for the non-peasant classes) and the main centre of information and symbol

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* Thus a daughter of a certain poor man was slaving in a household to clear a debt. The father worked very hard and earned the necessary kahavanu to redeem the daughter. On his way to fetch the daughter, he saw a monk, and, changing his mind, he bought a meal with the money for redeeming the daughter and offered it to the monk. Later the man told the daughter what happened and partook of the merit.' (p. 555)

During a famine, a certain household tied the little rice available in a cloth, boiled it in water and satisfied their daily hunger with that. The process was upset when a monk came to their house. They thought 'Just because we had not given alms in the previous birth, we are starving like this. If we obtain merit now by offering a meal to the monk, we will never have a time like this.' They cooked the little rice in the bag and offered it to the monk.' (p. 575)

disbursement. We have discussed how at the centre a marriage between those having access to the surplus, namely the feudal court, on the one hand and religion on the other arose to provide a system of legitimisation of rule. These factors in the centre of administration in the country are also paralleled at the village level. The king and his court who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the surplus have at the village level surplus extractors in the form of officials for tax collecting etc. who hold primacy in secular matters at the village level. The main religious fraternity and its associated body of symbols, images etc. also have their counterpart in the village represented by the local *pansala*. The latter performed the function of transmitting downwards the literature and the thought coming from the central monastic establishment. In this way, specially the monks, perform the useful function of keeping the populace tied to the legitimised *status quo*. It is this local monk who in face to face encounters with the peasant population reads out the Mahavamsa view of society and history ending with the exhortation 'compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious' with naturally pious cries of 'Sadhu' from the populace, one may add.

It is the monk who reads from the Saddhamalankaraya and Pujavaliya the relevant passages of giving both to Caesar and Christ again amidst natural cries of 'Sadhu'. The ideological control on the population from centre to periphery seems to be complete. In this light the role of the dagoba and the tank appears in effect as respectively the giver of surplus to those above and the maintainer of law and the given order and not the romanticised function that is purveyed by Martin Wickremasinghe.

Further we have shown the increasing this-worldly economic and social ties between the secular power on the one hand and the religious on the other, at the level of the country's centre in the form of large scale monastic landlordism and the like. A similar parallel process occurs at the village level with very probably the main *dayakas* of the *pansala* being both the king's tax collector and the maintainer of law and



order. The connection between the religious centre and the tank at the village level we should note reach back, as we have already indicated, beyond the time of both Buddhism and the Sinhalese, to the pre-Buddhistic megalithic times. Urn burials associated with the Megalithic culture and which had a particular religious significance were always beside the tanks they served.

We have discussed very briefly the class context within which the culture was created, transmitted and observed. However, within the settings of class and the particular requirements of the growing state in Sri Lanka, which determined the broad outlines of the culture, a definite content and form was also transmitted and formed. If we look first at the religion itself, religious thought as well as associated philosophy, psychology etc. were absorbed by this cultural complex. We have drawn attention to the ideological uses of Buddhism but there were also those who really cared for its fundamental goals and truths in the spirit of Buddha's search for truth. There would have thus been many individuals who would have reached the heights of meditative powers and psychological perceptions described in Buddhism. There were personnel motivated by the intrinsic goals set by Buddha and sought to achieve a view of truth by following the Buddha (and other sages in the primary Indian tradition) in a personal renunciation and individual search for truth. These monks would have existed in small groups or sometimes like the later Vanavasins would have banded together. But the basic design that Buddhism in its marriage to state power in Sri Lanka meant that the activities of these individuals were not necessarily the primary goals of Sri Lankan state Buddhism. The institutionalised goals were those implied in our earlier description.

The formalised state pattern* which religion took also coloured the functioning of so-called non-orthodox traditions.

* The overpowering effect of the formal religious body of thought tied to state power has apparently had a stultifying effect on intellectual originality in this field; it is therefore significant to note that Sri Lanka with

Abhayagiri itself we know was in size as large an edifice as those of the so-called orthodox tradition and Fa-Hsien records the same order of magnitude of monks there as in the case of the Mahavihara. In later centuries with the growth of Mahayana in the sub-continent, religious centres of Sri Lanka follow suit at least to some extent reaching even international eminence. Thus the Chinese Emperor sends Amoghavajra to Sri Lanka to collect 500 Tantrayana texts in the 7th century indicative of the wide spread of Mahayana. Later Mahayanist influences continue to have a strong impact on the state religion itself as indicated by the main sculpture complex at Pollannaruwa, namely the Gal Vihara. These accretions in the official theology continue in the years ahead, although the official ideological organs continue to call this changing body of thought and practice Theravada. Theravada, therefore in effect becomes not the 'original' teaching as is usually implied, but the official sanctioned corpus of the state religion with its ideological implications and connotations.

The styles of painting, sculpture, architecture also changed during the entirety of the traditional period. These styles are largely a product of the cultural contacts within the South Asian region and one can delineate parallels to Sri Lanka art within the region, as for example between the paintings at Sigiriya and Ajantha. Similar parallels are seen in styles of sculpture, literature etc.

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its tradition of state patronage of Buddhism (or may be because of it) has not produced a single major thinker of any originality compared with the mainland names like Nagarjuna, Dinnaga etc. Commentators like Buddhagosa and Dharmapala are not in this category of original thinkers. The only Sri Lanka religious thinker of any originality, Aryadeva, a disciple of Nagarjuna, was nurtured in a foreign clime and is never mentioned in the local literature (with possibly one oblique reference in the Mahavamsa) although biographies of his exist as far away as in Japan and China.



These similarities do not imply however a pure diffusionsit view of art from the kingdoms of India to Sri Lanka. On the other hand, these kingdoms and ours are to be seen as an interconnected cultural matrix mutually influencing each other. Within this common cultural matrix, Sri Lanka makes also original contributions, as for instance in the characteristic Sri Lankan styles in both the seated as well as the standing Buddhas. The Sri Lankan tradition also fashioned with a possible parallel in South India (at Nagarjunakonda) a unique decorative doorstep, the Moonstone, having a possible religious symbolic meaning (although we must note that this presumed symbolism only exists in the minds of 20th century romantic archaeologists than in the official chronicles or other ancient descriptions). Similarly, guardstones developed into a distinctive Sri Lanka style with a certain floridity about it.

In literature too (all the four languages, Sinhala, Tamil, Pali, Sanskrit, of Sri Lankan literature being of mainland origin) major styles like the Mahakavyas are followed as for example in the *Kavisilumina*, *Sasadavata*, and *Muvadevdavata*. (One of the earliest extant Sinhala works is a translation of Dandin's *Kavyadarsha*' one of the major works on Sanskrit poetics.) The Sandesa poetry form, although it was probably derived from Sanskrit models like Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*, similarly develops into a distinctive genre of its own. But in these works too, the descriptions and the ideology supports the existing social order. The Indian *Jataka* stories were also translated into Sinhala but although these described sometimes the life of everyday people of India, the underlying social ideology as opposed to an individualised ideology of personal liberation – was that of supporting the existing social order.

We have in the descriptions above given a broad outline of the growth of our traditional culture within a particular socio-economic framework. To summarise these: the twin pillars of the culture, Sinhala Language and Buddhism were introduced at a time of consolidation of state power on an all-island basis with the growth of an adequate surplus. Buddhism, specially, closely allied itself with state power.

The cultural artefacts that grew in the country can be demarcated into a culture of the peasant masses and the culture of the overlords. The growth of massive architecture and colossal sculpture is to be explained within the context of this dichotomy and the growth of state power. The cultural artefacts of the masses remained throughout this period at roughly the same level as those of the megalithic period or perhaps marginally higher. At the village level intermediaries exist between the peasant and the organs at the centre exemplified in physical terms by the tank and the dagoba. However, the tank provides the surplus which is extracted by the local official for transmission upwards and the monk at the dagoba provides the ideological justification for the *status quo* the surplus extracting official being probably the chief *dayaka* of the temple. However, within this cultural-ideological control system serving the surplus extraction towards the centre and keeping the peasant at roughly the same living standard level through virtually 2500 years, real aesthetic experiences occur. The sculptor of stone gets a sense of accomplishment as do the later onlookers of the finished product get a feeling of *rasa* if their artistic consciousness was sufficiently high. But such high consciousness is again dependent on exposure to the arts and descriptions and discussions about them, which in turn means such aesthetic experiences were limited only to the elite either at the centre or at the village level – although of course significant sections of the masses could have seen such finished artistic products and been overawed by them.

## Concluding Note

The above discussion relating to the growth of Sri Lankan culture as almost a necessary adjunct to the growth of a centralised kingdom based on the surplus from irrigated agriculture has not referred to the mechanisms by which this surplus was collected or to the relations of production. This concluding note will briefly refer to these aspects specially in view of the fact that some of the writers on the political economy of early Sri Lanka (such as Murphy 1967) have used concepts, implicit or explicit - such as Wittvogel's 'hydraulic



society' and Marx's Asiatic mode of production – which imply a particular social organisation of the production apparatus. However, it should be noted that the arguments relating to the collection of surplus and its use which I have described above can stand without a description of the mechanics by which this is done.

First, the system of land tenure. The king was not the sole owner of land (Siriweera 1972 p. 11-19), although he had ownership rights on waste and jungle lands in addition to the plots of land specifically owned by him. Land was owned by individuals as well as bodies such as the monasteries the king himself at times engaging in private transactions to purchase land (ibid p.48); the resulting system of tenure involved 'a wide variety of tenurial obligations' (ibid). Specifically these arrangements mean that in early Sri Lanka there was no collective ownership in land which 19th century writers such as Mains (1876) claimed to have existed in South Asian countries (Siriweera p. 23).

The surplus was extracted by the ruling strata – the king and his district level governors and associated officials – by two principal means, taxes and service obligations. Taxes were on paddy lands, as well as *chena* (ibid p. 36) whilst there were also taxes on trade (ibid. p. 39) as well as on irrigation water (ibid p. 40). The system of tax collection was devolved and decentralised to regional chiefs (ibid p. 49) the decentralised system being therefore feudal rather than administrative. Taxes could be paid in kind or cash (ibid).

The extracting of surplus by service obligations, was what later came to be known as *rajakariya*, service for the king. Such *corvee* activity bound every layman for service in public works such as the construction of irrigation works, monuments etc. (ibid p. 27). The Mahavamsa description of the building of the Mahathupa in the 2nd century B. C. (Mahavamsa p. 199) indicates how service labour was mobilised for public works. Release of large amounts of labour for such public works meant, as we have noted earlier, that the agricultural system was capable of producing a sufficient surplus to provide

for this labour, as well as for the craftsmen and the thousands of monks both of which categories were not directly involved in agricultural production.

Murphy (1957) attempted to fit Sri Lanka's irrigation based socio-economic system to Wittvogel's (1957) concept of 'Oriental Despotism'. Leach (1959) showed that Wittvogel's scheme did not fit the Sri Lankan case. As Wittvogel's concepts owe heritage to Marx's Asiatic mode of Production I am repeating here some of Leach's points as it will facilitate our discussion on the Asiatic mode of production.

Wittvogel's concept of 'Oriental Despotism' is based empirically on his observations on classical China and is theoretically dependent on Marx's original ideas. One of Wittvogel's underlying aims in his work was a polemic with the Soviet Union and was an attempt to show that the Soviet Union was an un-Marxian embodiment of repressive social principles found in 'oriental' societies. His view was that 'oriental' societies depended on irrigation systems controlled tightly by an overwhelming bureaucracy, and gave rise consequently to a most oppressive state. In these states based on widespread irrigation systems ('hydraulic societies'), the ruling political regime was, because of the tight bureaucracy, despotic rather than feudal. Leach correctly pointed out that in the case of Sri Lanka, although it is a society based on large scale irrigation, there has been no tight administrative control of the system. On the other hand, control has been through a more devolved feudal system based on *rajakariya* (the devolved nature is best illustrated by the ancient records referring to the virtual contradictory expression of *disave rajakariya* - 'provincial governor's king's work' - Leach p. 17). If then, early Sri Lanka does not fall into the category of an administrative despotism, how does its known characteristics compare with Marx's Asiatic mode of production?

Marx's ideas on Asian society were based largely on his readings on India. To Marx, the Asiatic was one of the four principal modes of production that he discussed, Asiatic, Ancient, Feudal and Capitalist. Of this the first, the oriental had as a basis direct communal property and had not yet



formed itself into a class society. The central characteristic of this system was 'the self-sustaining unity of manufacture and agriculture' at the level of the village commune which thus contained 'all the conditions for reproduction and surplus production within itself' (Hobsbawm 1964 p. 70, 83,91). These Asiatic systems could also be organised in various different ways, decentralised or centralised, 'more despotic or more democratic'. In this mode, cities, according to Marx, have virtually no place; Asian cities occurring only where 'the location is favourable to external trade or where the ruler and his satraps exchange their revenue (surplus produce) for labour. which they expend as a labour fund' (ibid p. 71). The essential works of communication and control of irrigation systems would be done by 'the despotic government which is poised above the lesser communities (ibid). To Marx, the 'Asian history is a kind of undifferentiated unity of town and country (the large cities, properly speaking, must be regarded merely as a princely camp superimposed on the real economic structure) (ibid p. 77).

It is also interesting to note that classical Marxist formulation of the Asiatic system left it out of the classification of a 'civilization' as Hobsbawm (p. 51) has observed from reading Engel's '*Origin of the Family*. Engels* includes under the 'three great epochs of civilization', the slave based (ancient) system, the serf based (feudal) system of the Middle Ages and the wage-labour based (capitalist) system but excludes the Asiatic mode as belonging to the pre-history of 'civilization'. Engels further amplifies the nature of this society in *Anti Duhring*: 'the ancient communes, where they continued to exist, have for thousands of years formed the basis of the most barbarous forms of state, Oriental Despotism from India to Russia, (quoted in Leach, p. 3.).

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* Gunawardena (1972 p. 27) has pointed out that Marx and Engels have differed somewhat on their interpretations of Asian society, specially on the nature of the 'Asian' state, Engels' interpretation giving the picture of a more repressive system than that of Marx.

How does this brief summary of the characteristics of the Asiatic mode agree with the known characteristics of ancient Sri Lanka? First, the system of land tenure; land was *not* held as communal property, as we have pointed out earlier, a complex system of tenurial arrangements existing. Land was held communally in the manner depicted by the Asiatic mode generally only by monks, where almost by definition of a monk's community, land had to be held communally (*sangika*) although even here 'private' (puggalika) ownership was known (Gunawardena 1972 p. 72). Communal holding in the monk's community was not a characteristic of the general socio-economic system but an expression of the system of belief of the Buddhist clergy - comparable say in the case of modern capitalist America to the existence of various idealist groups and 'communes' who have property in common, although they exist within a broader privately owned economic system. The system of land tenure and revenue in Sri Lanka characterised itself as a more decentralised system, closer to European feudalism than to the system sketched by Marx.

The city in Sri Lanka (specially Anuradhapura or Pollonnaruwa, and, to a lesser extent provincial ones such as Tissa, or ports such as Jambukola and Mahatiththa) does not correspond to the 'Asiatic mode', These. cities were not simple 'princely camps for the ruler and his satraps' to exchange their revenue for a labour fund. Anuradhapura, as its massive ruins as well as written records both Sri Lankan (Mahavamsa) and foreign (for example Fa-Hsien) reveal, was a large city that had grown up organically to fit into the role of political, economic, social and cultural centre for the rest of the country, the only Sri Lanka city that would fit the description of a princely camp being perhaps Sigiriya. There was also a strong differentiation between town (Anuradhapura) and the country on these dimensions of the political, economic, social and the cultural; and consequently town and country was not an undifferentiated unit. The strong social differentiation that existed between the ruling strata (the king and his officials in the city, and regional disavas and their officials in the countryside) and the population also belies the non-emergence of a class society under 'Asian' conditions.



However, at the village level (or more accurately at the level of a collection of villages) one could discern a more or less self-sufficient unit with both manufacture (which was largely caste-based) and agriculture meshing into each other, thus to a certain extent agreeing with Marx's depiction of a unity of manufacture and agriculture in the Asian villages. But I find it difficult to see how this differed in a major way from medieval European villages which were also more or less self-sufficient in this manner.

Marx's main concern was with the emergence of capitalism from (European) feudalism and his interests on and knowledge about previous systems were limited. The knowledge by Europeans of Asian systems at the time Marx was writing over 100 years ago were extremely limited-not to mention being often bigoted and tainted with prejudice. *Hobsbawm has also pointed out that at the time of Marx's writing, anthropological knowledge of non - European 'primitive' societies was virtually non-existent, whilst Marx himself was thin on pre-history and on non-European societies in general although he had a markedly better grasp of the existing knowledge of India and other parts of Asia. The lack of fit of Marx's Asiatic mode of production to Sri Lankan ancient system has to be seen within this context, Marx's attempts being the application of powerful and insightful tools of analysis to the existing, incomplete and even false data of his time.

If, then, neither Marx's Asiatic mode of production nor Wittvogel's specialised derivative of it, does not fit adequately the known facts on Sri Lanka, how can we describe

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* The Indian historian Romila Thapar in a lecture to the Social Scientists Association in Sri Lanka in June 1978 drew attention to the fact that although Marx was critical of the existing literature on European systems, he accepted more or less uncritically the existing literature on Asian systems.

the mechanics of the early socio-economic formation of Sri Lanka? An attempt is made below in the following summary.

The early Sri Lanka system began with the gradual consolidation and centralisation of an irrigation based agricultural system. Although centralised there was also in the final system a high degree of devolvement and autonomy to regional units. The tenure, revenue collection and irrigation repair and maintenance systems was also often decentralised although at times centralised control and mobilisation were resorted to specially in times of war and in the case of really large scale works. The irrigation based agricultural system had social contradications (in the Marxist sense) with the major contradiction being between a ruling 'class' formed around the king and his regional governors on the one hand and the mass of the peasantry on the other hand. Further, the social mechanisms of the caste system gave rise to a social division of labour at the level of crafts and services allowing other economic activities to be undertaken. As the system grew, there was an increasing cleavage between town and country, as well as potentially between the rulers and the ruled. The tendencies to cleavage and disruption in the system was not prevented by a strong administrative and despotic system but largely by cultural and ideological means. In the early part of this paper we have discussed in detail how this ideological system operated both at the centre (the town) and the countryside, down to the village. We have indicated how ideological factors played a key role in the formation of the centralised system as well as in its later maintenance.

The growth of a centralised state was paralleled by the growth and consolidation of the irrigation system. Although ideological Sri Lankan history in the form of the Mahavamsa gives the impression that a unitary kingdom was established as early as the 3rd century B. C. (or before at the time of Vijaya if we extend the credibility of the Mahavamsa to the legendary period), there is strong evidence from inscriptions that this was in fact not so. Inscriptions referring



to regional rulers are found all over the country up to the 1st century B. C. (Hettiarachchi 1972 pp 144, 145) and the existence of regional rulers are also occasionally corroborated by literary references (ibid). The consolidation of central authority on an all-island basis was apparently successful according to Hettiarachchi (ibid p. 152) who has studied the kinship system of Sri Lanka only at the time of Vasabha (2nd century A. D.) in whose time we should also note that the first large scale irrigation systems were constructed. (ibid p. 156). These facts push one to the conclusion that centralisation was finally consummated only when the irrigation systems reached sufficient dimensions and spread its tentacles to large parts of the country.

However this total consolidation of central control was at least four centuries after it was both historically proclaimed in Anuradhapura (during Devanampiyatissa's time) and the ideological gum in the form of State Buddhism to legitimise the rule was introduced. The percolation of State Buddhism to the peripheries of the island to make this ideological gum reach the various regional units down to the village level would, we could assume, also have taken a few centuries, which was also the time taken of to consolidate centralised rule.

In conclusion we should note that system of ideological control is a 'soft' system of control in contrast to a despotic and overtly repressive kind. In this it is more reminiscent of how advanced capitalist societies of the late 20th century are held together (ideological and cultural control forming a significant part of the control apparatus) than how early 19th century societies were held together by harsher repressive means.

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# The People of the Lion: Sinhala Consciousness in History and Historiography

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The evolution of group identities and of ideologies associated with social groups represents one of the most fascinating areas of historical research. It is also one of the most exacting fields of study requiring of the historian an inordinate amount of caution. The historian who undertakes an inquiry of this type has to constantly keep in mind that group consciousness, like all ideology, is historically determined and historically limited. The Sinhala ideology in its contemporary form, with its associations with language race and religion, forms an essential part of contemporary bourgeois culture and has succeeded in thoroughly permeating such areas of cultural activity as creative writing. It is not an exaggeration to say that during the last hundred years or so the Sinhala ideology in its contemporary form has radically refashioned our view of our past. Since it is very easy to assume, as many writers do too often, that the Sinhala consciousness in its current form has a very old history, it may be relevant to point out that even in the European languages the word race (Fr. *race*, Ital. *razza*) dates only from about the sixteenth century and that the biological definition of the term as denoting a group distinct from other members of the species by specific physiological characteristics, is of even more recent origin. In both Sinhala and Tamil, it is difficult to find a satisfactory equivalent to this word. Hence it does not seem likely that racial consciousness can be traced back very far into the past of these two linguistic groups. Thus when an author of popular historical writings speaks of the mythical Vijaya as having been anxious to find a queen "of his own Aryan race" and further states that "his pride of race revolted at the thought of any but a pure

Aryan succeeding to the Government which he has striven so laboriously to found" (Seneviratne, 1930, p. 16) or when academic historians writing about ancient Sri Lanka refer to "the Sinhala race" (Barnett, 1921, p, 548: Mendis, 1943 p. 20), they are all presenting a view of the past moulded by contemporary ideology. These examples have been cited here to emphasise the need to re-examine this dominant and popular historical view, to go back to the original documents and to place the appearance of different types of group consciousness in their historical settings.

The Brahmi inscriptions, which are the earliest historical documents in Sri Lanka (Paranavitana, 1970), reflect an initial stage in the growth of group consciousness. Perhaps the most important basis of group identity at this time was lineage. Individuals who set up inscriptions generally give the names of their fathers or of both fathers and grandfathers, while a few of them trace their paternal descent back for three or four generations. Some inscriptions particularly those of the Brahmanas, refer to the *varna* status of the authors. Occupations and socio-political status of donors are cited in many inscriptions. It is particularly noteworthy that in a significant number of records the terms *upasaka* and *upasika* are used to describe the donors reflecting the early beginnings of a religious identity. A few of the records point to other group identities like Kabojha, Milaka and Dameda. It is likely that Kabojha and Milaka were tribal groups. Paranavitana has suggested that Dameda was the equivalent of Dravidian. (Paranavitana 1959, pp 88 - 9) However, it is more likely that Dameda is the equivalent of Tamil. Whether the term was used in this period to denote a tribal, linguistic or some other group deserves careful investigation. The term Sinhala, on the other hand is conspicuous by its absence.

The disparate nature of the early settlements in the island, with each village clustering around a small reservoir would not have been conducive to the development of strong group identities which brought together a large number of people into one cohesive unit. At this primary



stage of the development of group consciousness, lineage was perhaps the most important criterion from which people derived their social identity. Socio - political position, *varna* or ritual status, religion and tribal affiliation were other factors which determined group identity. During the period from about the middle of the second century B. C. to about the second century A. D. Sri Lanka witnessed the unfolding of a crucial process of social change bringing about dissolution of communal property rights and separation of the primary agricultural producers from elements essential for their production. Parallel and related to this process was the evolution of a state apparatus which brought the whole island under the control of the rulers of Anuradhapura. (Gunawardana, 1978). It is most likely that the emergence of the state brought with it changes in the ideological sphere, paving the way to a new group identity.

The term Sinhala (Pali Sihala, Skt. Simhala) occurs for the first time in Sri Lankan sources in the *Dipavamsa* which has been assigned to the fourth - fifth centuries A. D. In this chronicle the term occurs only once, and in this cryptic verse it is stated that the island was known as Sihala "on account of the lion" (*Lankadipo ayam ahu sihena sihalaiti Dipavamsa* ch. 9 v. 1) The term Sihaladipa or "the Sinhala island" occurs in the *Samantapasadika* (pp. 2, 136), the commentary on the Vinaya section of the Pali Canon, written by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century A. D. The text states that the earlier commentaries used by Buddhaghosa had been written in the language of Sihala-dipa. Fa - Hian, who also visited the island in the fifth century, refers to it by the name "the country of the lions" (Beal, 1957, p. 45) The term Heladivi, the equivalent of the Pali Sihaladipa, occurs in one of the graffiti at Sigiri which have been assigned by Paranavitana to a period extending from the eighth to the tenth century A. D. (Paranavitana 1956, Vol. II, p. 179). By the eighth century the name was being used to denote a group of people, as is evident from an inscription found at a ruined monastic site in the Raubaka Plateau in Central Java, which refers to the Simhalas. (de Casparis, 1962)

Though the earliest reference to the term Sinhala in Sri Lankan sources is in the *Dipavamsa*, there is evidence in other sources which suggests that the name can be traced back to an earlier date. In the Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta which has been assigned to the fourth century A. D., there is a reference to Saimhalaka, obviously a name derived from Simhala, among those who accepted the suzerainty of the Gupta emperor and paid him tribute. (Fleet, 1963, p. 8). Pelliot (1921) has drawn attention to the occurance of Chinese renderings of the name Sihaladipa in literary works of the second and third centuries A. D. Three Brahmi inscriptions from the far south of the Indian subcontinent, written in a language which has been identified as Tamil in its formative stages, are also relevant to this study. According to the reading presented by Subrahmanya Ayyar, (1924), the term Ila is found in these three records. Some epigraphists do not agree with his readings of the Arittapatti and the Cittannavacal records, but they agree that the Tirupparankunram inscription refers to Ila householders and that the term Ila should be identified as denoting Sri Lanka. (Mahalingam, 1967, pp. 251-7) Ayyar suggested an early pre - Christian date for the record, but Mahadevan (1966) assigns it to the first - second centuries A. D. He interprets the term *caiy - alan* in an inscription from Muttupatti assigned to the same period, as a reference to a person from Sri Lanka, but this translation is doubtful. The term Ila in these records has been identified by epigraphists as denoting Sri Lanka. Ilam denoted Sri Lanka in classical Tamil works, and it has been suggested in the *Tamil Lexicon* published by the Madras University that the term would have been derived from the Pali Sihala and the Sanskrit Simhala. (Tamil lexicon, p. 382) This seems very likely since the *Centan Tivakaram* (p. 62) one of the earliest lexicons in the Tamil language, equates Cinkalam with Ilam.

If we accept this explanation of the origin of Ilam, it would imply that the term Sinhala was also being used by the first or second century of the Christian era to denote a principality and certain types of people from that principality. If indeed the term Ilam was derived from Sihala,



its current use in politics reminds one of the observation made by Marc Bloch, the great medievalist, about the term Frenchmen. It is a historical irony that Gauls bear today a name derived from that of the Franks whom they considered to be their enemies. Bloch pointed out that this inappropriate and unfortunate name gave rise in later times, "among the more reflective of our thinkers, to feelings of tragic anxiety." (Bloch 1945)

It seems very likely that the beginnings of the Sinhala consciousness arose as part of the ideology of the period of state formation. It is but to be expected that an ideology which evolved during such a period would emphasise a certain type of unity. However, state society in Sri Lanka was a society divided on the bases of class as well as lineage, clan, occupation, ritual status and political position. The chronicles give a fair idea how in such a context group consciousness developed and what form it assumed. The *Mahavamsa* has been generally assigned to the sixth century A. D., but it can be argued that it is a later work. In this chronicle the term Sihala occurs only twice. However, on closer examination it becomes clear that the sixth and the seventh chapters present a myth which forms a central element in the Sinhala ideology.

According to this myth, the daughter of the king of Vanga by a princess from Kalinga, runs away from home and joins a caravan heading for Magadha. On the way, in the Lala country, the caravan is attacked by a lion who abducts the princess. From the union of the princess with the lion are born a son and a daughter, Sihabahu and Sihasivali. When the children grow up, they flee from the lion's den with their mother and reach the frontier regions of their grandfather's kingdom. Here they are befriended by a kinsman who rules the frontier province. The lion ravages villages in his search for his offspring. Sihabahu kills the lion. On the death of his grandfather, he is offered the kingdom of Vanga, but he prefers to found a kingdom with a new capital city, Sihapura, where he reigns with his sister as his queen. They have sixteen pairs of twins. Vijaya, the eldest,

is of violent disposition. He and seven hundred followers (*parivara*) harass the people. When the enraged *mahajanas* demand that Vijaya be put to death, the king exiles him together with his followers. Their ship touches at Supparaka, but as a result of their conduct, they are driven away again and they land in Sri Lanka.

On the day of their arrival in Sri Lanka the Buddha lay dying, but his thoughts were on the safety of Vijaya and his followers. The Buddha assigns Sakka to protect them, and the latter sends the God Uppalavanna to the island. Uppalavanna sprinkles water on the men and ties thread on their hands for their protection. Kuvanna, a *yakkhini*, lures the men to devour them but is foiled by the power of sacralized thread (*parittasutta*). Vijaya overpowers and espouses Kuvanna and, with her help, massacres the *yakkhas* in the island to win over the kingdom. He ruled from Tambapanni and his followers establish five other settlements: Anuradhagama, Upatissagama, Ujjeni, Uruvela and Vijitapura. The chronicle explains that the region where Vijaya landed and the island itself were known by the name Tambapanni because the hands of Vijaya and his followers were reddened when they touched the earth. The chronicle also gives a definition of the term Sihala: "The king Sihabahu, since he had slain the lion (was called) Sihala and, by reason of the ties between him and them, all those (followers of Vijaya) were also (called) Sihala." (Geiger, 1950, p. 58) Since it is not possible to hold a consecration ceremony without a queen of *ksatriya* birth, an embassy is sent to ask for the hand of the daughter of the Pandya king. The Pandya king sends his daughter, many other maidens and "a thousand families of the eighteen guilds of workmen (*pessakarake*)" (1). On the arrival of the princess, Vijaya marries her after brusquely dismissing Kuvanna, and members of his retinue marry the other maidens from Madhura, Vijaya is consecrated and rules for thirty-eight years at Tambapanni, and every year he sends pearls and chanks worth two hundred thousand to his father-in-law at Madhura. Kuvanna goes to Lankapura, the city of the *yakkhas*, where she is killed by a *yakkha*. Her son and daughter flee to the Malaya region and live



there "with the king's assent" (*tajanunnya*). The boy takes the girl to wife, and from them are sprung the Pulindas.

The story of Vijaya is found in the *Dipavamsa* and it is evident from the comments in the *Vamsatthappakasini*, the commentary on the *Mahavamsa*, that there was another version in the chronicle of the Abhayagiri monastery. But the Vijaya story was certainly not the only "colonization myth"(2) about Sri Lanka. The *Divyavadana* presents another story while the account of Hiuen Tsang cites two more. One of the stories cited by Hiuen Tsang (Hiuen Tsang I) is similar to the Vijaya myth. However, the earlier episodes take place not in and around Vanga but in South India. Further, it is the killer of the lion who is exiled as punishment for his parricide. He founds a kingdom in the island. "Because the original founder got his name by catching a lion (*chih-sse-tseu*)," the myth explains, "they called the country (after his name) Simhala (*Sang-kta-lo*." (Beal. 1958, pp. 435–37) In the second story (Hiuen sang II), which is basically similar to that in the *Divyavadana*, (pp. 523–29) Simhala was the son of a great merchant of Jambudvipa called Simha (*Sang-kia*). Simhala comes to the island with five hundred merchants, looking for gems, and stays back to live in the company of *raksasis*. When the merchants discover that they are about to be imprisoned by their paramours, they escape from the island with the help of a flying horse. Simhala is elected king in his own country, but he leads an expedition to the island and founds a new kingdom after vanquishing the *raksasis*. "Because of the king's name," the story states, "the country was called Simhala." (Beal, 1958, pp. 438–42) Some analysts of these myths have drawn attention to the similarity of certain elements in them to Buddhist stories like the Padakusalamanava, Sutana, Ghata, Valahassa and Devadhamma Jatakas (see Perera, 1959 and Mendis, 1965) and it has been suggested that either the myths were influenced by the Jatakas or both groups were derived from a common source.

The *Mahavamsa* version of the Vijaya myth contains certain elements which are discordant with the myth of the

visit of the Buddha that the same chronicle presents. During the first visit to the island, the Buddha is said to have expelled the *yakkhas* who lived in the island to Giridipa, but Vijaya and his followers find a flourishing kingdom of the *yakkhas* in the island. However, the *Dipavamsa* version of the Vijaya myth makes no mention of Kuvanna or of Vijaya's encounters with the *yakkhas* and is, therefore, consistent with myth of the Buddha's visit. This discrepancy between the two main chronicles raises the problem whether the *Dipavamsa* deleted part of the Vijaya myth to present a more consistent account or whether those elements in the *Mahavamsa* version relating to the presence of the *yakkhas* represent later accretions. The *Vamsatthappakasini* provides additional information about the *yakkhas* when it states that the chief of the *yakkhas* at Sirisavatthu was Mahakalasena and that he married Polamitta, the daughter of a *yakkhini* called Gonda. The text also tells us that the two children of Kuvanna were called Jivahattha and Dipella. (*Vamsatthappakasini*, pp. 259-60, 264) However, it is not possible to consider these statements as indicative of the relative date of this part of the myth since it is not clear from the contexts whether the author of the *Vamsatthappakasini* is citing, as usual, information from the ancient Sinhala chronicle of the Mahavihara or whether he was merely drawing on extended versions of the myth current in his own time. The *Divyavadana* is more useful in this respect since it shows that a version of the myth which spoke of the presence of *yakkhas* at the time of the arrival of Simhala was prevalent at the time *Dipavamsa* was written. (3) Most of the myths cited above present the view that the island was originally inhabited by the *yakkhas*, and in all these stories the attitude towards the yakkhas is one of hostility. In the *Dipavamsa* the Buddha is the hero who vanquishes them while in the *Divyavadana* and the Hiuen Tsang II it is Simhala, the eponymous hero, who is credited with the achievement. It is likely that the two sets of myths were of independent origin and had a parallel existence. Evidently the *Mahavamsa* is presenting a combination of these two sets without paying heed to the resultant contradiction. We shall later see that the *yakkhas*, like



another element absent from the *Dipavamsa* version i.e. the arrival of Vijaya's bride from Madhura, form an essential component which completes the message that the *Mahavamsa* version of the myth is seeking to convey.

Several writers have seen in the geographical references in the myths, pointers to the original homes of the immigrants who came and settled in the island. Barnett (1921) saw in them indications of two streams of migration: one of Dravidians from Bengal and Orissa and a later stream, "mainly Aryan," from the Western regions of India. Basham (1952) argued for the rejection of the Vijaya story "as a statement of historical fact" but he tended to attach significance to the geographical references. He seems to have considered references to Kalinga and Madhura as later accretions, but he detected in other references, the arrival of the first wave of immigrants from the Western parts of India and a second wave of immigration from the East. It is noteworthy that though the *Mahavamsa* refers to Lala as a region between Vanga and Magadha, several writers including both Barnett and Basham have identified it with Lata on the Western Coast of India. Paranavitana (1959) was inclined to accept the same view in his attempt to trace "the original home of the Aryan settlers" to the Northwestern parts of India. However, while all the different versions of the myth reflect what may be called the "immigrant mentality" of a dominant element of the population of Sri Lanka and their belief that they came from India, attempts at locating "the original homes" on the basis of geographical references in the myths would amount to confusing ideological statements with accounts of actual events. The discrepancies between different versions of the myths also point to the need for caution. The *Mahavamsa* refers to Vanga, Kalinga, Lala, Magadha, Supparaka and Madhura. The *Dipavamsa* does not refer to Madhura and gives Bharukaccha as a place visited by Vijaya on his way to Sri Lanka. On the other hand, Hiuen Tsang I locates the home of Simhala in South India. The *Divyavadana* present Simhala as a merchant from a kingdom called Simhakalpa and implies it was in Jambudvipa. The Hiuen Tsang II version of the myth does not refer to any specific part of India, but merely states that Simhala was from Jambudvipa.

As Mendis (1965) correctly detected, one of the main functions of the different versions of these "colonization myths" seem to be to explain the origin of the name Sinhala. Certain versions attempt to explain how the island came to be called by this name while the *Mahavamsa* version seeks to explain how the island came to be called Tambapanni and how a certain group of people came to be called the Sinhala. Mendis believed that "Simhala was originally the name of the island and the people got their names from it many centuries later." (Mendis, 1965, p. 268) Such a sequence is not evident from the source material examined above, and, in fact, the information in the South Indian Brahmi inscriptions seems to preclude such an assertion. The writings of Onesicritos who accompanied Alexander to India testify to the fact that Taprobane or Tambapanni was the earliest historical name of the island. (McCrindle, 1901, d. 102) Even in the second century A. D., Ptolemy referred to the island as Taprobane though he noted that it was also called Salike. (McCrindle, 1885, 247-59) The *Mahavamsa* version of the Vijaya myth, it would thus appear, originally evolved at a time when the island was still known as Tambapanni and a group of people living there were called Sinhala.

Evidently there were two distinct connotations of the term Sinhala. The long and detailed description of the origin of the ruling family the myth presents, carries the implication that it was the members of this lineage who were the real people of the lion. This meaning of the term is also found in the later chronicle *Culavamsa*. After describing the matrimonial alliance that Mahinda IV formed with Kalinga and his elevation of members of his lineage to high positions in the kingdom, the *Culavamsa* states that he thereby strengthened the Sinhala lineage (*Sihalavamsam. Culavamsa*, 54. 10). Obviously, the term is being used here to denote the dynasty.

Basham (1952) and Obeyesekera (1970) have drawn attention to the elements of bestiality, parricide and incest in the myth. While in certain versions of the myth there



is no reference to an animal and Simha is a mere name, in those versions where Simha is in fact a lion, the relationship between the lion and the eponymous ancestor assumes a dual character. The latter is both "the progeny of the lion" as well as "the slayer of the lion." It is noteworthy that the *Mahavamsa* uses the term *adinnava*, a very rare word, to describe this relationship. The word can be associated with *adi*, meaning "beginning, as well as with *adiyati*, "to seize." It is most likely that this word was deliberately chosen to convey the dual character of this relationship. This element of the myth endowed the ruling dynasty with a marvellous origin which marked it out from the populace. The depiction of the hero as lion-slayer is comparable with the epic of Gilgamesh whose prowess in combat with lions is highlighted in a large number of Sumerian seals. (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*. pp. 36, 94) It is also possible to suggest that, as a structural element in the myth, parricide represents the negation and abnegation of animal origins. In later times, the lion-slaying aspect of the myth is found to be given greater emphasis. As noted earlier, according to the Hiuen Tsang I version of the myth, the founder of the kingdom received his name on account of his having caught a lion. The *Vamsatthappakasini*, too, states that Sihabahu was called Sihala because he had "caught the lion" (*siham gahitva iti. Vamsatthappakasini*, p. 261). These sources probaby reflect the fact that by about the seventh century, the people of the lion preferred to be known as lion-slayers rather than the progeny of the lion. It is this later interpretation of the term *adinnava* which influenced Geiger to translate the relevant verse of the *Mahavamsa* as cited above. The Hiuen Tsang I version of the myth does not refer to sibling incest that is found in the *Mahavamsa*. As Thapar (1978) has pointed out, while incest of this type explains how two siblings can found a lineage, it also stresses purity of descent. Sibling marriage finds mention in the Dasaratha Jataka and with reference to the Sakyas in the Pali Suttas. The story of the sixteen pairs of twins in the Vijaya myth also finds parallels in the Indian myths cited by Thapar.

Dynastic emblems of South Indian ruling houses are most useful in enabling us to understand the term Sinhala. The Pandyas had fish as their emblem, the Colas and the Sinda branch of the Naga lineage had the tiger and the Calukyas had the boar. It is also evident that certain South Indian ruling families bore the lion crest. Though the bull was the most widely used emblem of the Pallava of the Simhavisnu line, the figure of the lion is found on some of their coins and seals and on certain early copper plates. (Minakshi, 1938, p. 82) The animal figures on the Uruvapalli grant (Fleet, 1876, pp. 50 - 53) and the Pikira copper - plate (Hultzsch, 1905 - 6, pp. 159 - 63) have been identified as lions. It has been suggested on the basis of this evidence that the early Pallavas bore the lion emblem. The lion emblem was also used by some minor Cola ruling houses. The Malepadu plates of Punyakumara, dated in the eighth century, (Krishna Sastri, 1911 - 2, pp. 337 - 8) and a record from the Bastar region, issued by a chieftain called Candraditya, (*Madras Epigraphical Reports* 1908 - 9, p. 5) bear the lion crest. Both Punyakumara and Candraditya claim descent from Karikala Cola. It is very likely that, similarly, the lion was the emblem of the ruling house of Sri Lanka and that the dynasty got its name from the emblem. As in Sri Lanka, in South India, too, there were myths which sought to explain these emblems. For instance, the myths of the Sinda dynasty explain how their eponymous ancestor had been brought up a tiger. (Nilakanta Sastri, 1935, pp. 24 - 6)

There was evidently a second, wider meaning of the term Sinhala. The *Mahavamsa* states that on account of their association with Sihabahu (*tena sambandha*) "all these" were also called Sihala (*ete sabbe pi sihala*, *Mahavamsa* 7. 42). It is not clear from this cryptic verse who "all these" were, but the preceding verses speak of the followers of Vijaya. In its explanation of the passage, the *Vamsatthappakasini* states that the seven hundred members of Vijaya's retinue and all their descendants "up to the present day" are called Sinhalas because of their association with the prince called Sihala (*tena sihalanamikena rajakumarena sambandha*



*ete sattapurisasata ca tesam puttanattapanatta yavajjakaia manussa ca sabbe pi sihala name ahesunti attho. Vamsatthappakasini*, p. 261). Thus it is clear that at least by the time the *Vamsatthappakasini* came to be written a wider meaning of the term Sinhala was gaining currency.

Hypothetically, it is possible to postulate a dynasty > kingdom > people of the kingdom sequence in the development in Sinhala consciousness. However, there appear to have been certain factors operative at this time which prevented the development of a Sinhala consciousness which embraced all the people in the kingdom. It is particularly noteworthy that both the *Mahavamsa* and its commentary specifically exclude a substantial section of the population of the island from the social group denoted by the term. The Vijaya myth recognizes the existence of three major groups of people in the island. While outlining in detail the origin of the Sihalas, it also seems to explain the origins of the service castes and the Pulindas. Verses 43 - 45 in the seventh chapter of the *Mahavamsa* describe the settlements established by the seven hundred followers of Vijaya, while verses 56 - 57 refer to the thousand families of the service castes sent by the king of Madhura. The implication that this later group should not be confused with the Sihalas is emphasised in the *Vamsatthappakasini* when it specifies that the Sihalas were the descendants of "the seven hundred" who formed Vijaya's retinue and thereby excludes from this group the descendants of "the thousand families." The origin of the third major group, the Pulindas who occupied the Malaya region, is traced to the offspring of Vijaya and Kuvanna. Geiger was right in identifying the Pulindas with the Veddas. (Geiger, 1950 p. 60) Sibling incest in the story of their origin emphasises the "purity" of their descent and their distinct status. Thus the Vijaya myth seeks to indicate that the three major groups it identifies are separate categories with distinct origins. If the myth suggests any link at all it is between the Sinhala ruling house and the Pulindas, but here again it is noteworthy that, according to the myth, Vijaya did not have any

children by his marriage with the Pandya princess. Thus, while the violent Vijaya who suffered exile for his reprehensible ways is presented as the ancestor of the Pulindas, the ancestor of the Sinhalese ruling house is traced to Sumitta, the more sedate younger brother whose youngest son Panduvasudeva is said to have succeeded Vijaya. On the other hand, the service castes are presented as the descendants of the thousand families from Madhura and are thus unlinked by blood with the other two major groups.

These distinctions that the myth makes are of crucial importance for understanding the nature of group consciousness that was developing in the period after the formation of a unified kingdom under the control of Anuradhapura. They enable us to distinguish the Sinhala consciousness of this early period from linguistic nationalism and other types of group consciousness typical of more recent times. Of course, the presence of a common language was a basic prerequisite for the emergence of group consciousness. Buddhaghosa's commentaries speak of a language specific to the island. However, it is significant that language was not conceived as the crucial criterion or the basis of the Sinhala identity at this time. The Sinhala group consciousness did not bring together all speakers of the language but deliberately left out a considerable section of the linguistic group including the craftsmen-agriculturists and others who performed ritually "low" service functions.

In essence the Vijaya myth is presenting what may be termed a political definition of the Sinhala identity. The ruling house represented the Sihalas *par excellence*. It may be relevant to note here that the Sigiri monument, constructed by Kasyapa I (A. D. 477-95), gave expression to this identity through some of its architectural features. The dominant feature of this monument was the massive figure of the lion after which it was named. The royal apartments were on the summit of the rock. The architectural arrangements were such that the king, descending from his apartments, would walk out through the



mouth of the lion, emerging, as it were, from the bowels of the lion, and thereby evoking the mythical origins of the ruling house. The ruling dynasty sought to consolidate its power by utilizing such monuments to propagate the Sinhala myth. On the other hand, by emphasising its equally mythical relationship with the lineage of the Buddha, they attempted to draw upon the growing religious consciousness of the Buddhists in order to strenghen their position. (Gunawardana, 1976) According to the myth, those other than members of the ruling house acquired the Sinhala identity only through their association with the ruler or through being born in families with such associations. The seven hundred settlers are described as Vijaya's retinue (*parivara*) and some of them are specifically referred to as state functionaries (*amacca*). It has been pointed out (Gunawardana, 1978) that in ancient Sri Lanka, state functionaries were recruited primarily from families of high rank who owned property in irrigation works and land, and that there was a tendency for political office to be associated, generation after generation, with certain families. Traders were another prominent element in the society and their importance is reflected in certain versions of the myth where Simhala is presented as a merchant. Thus the group brought together by the Sinhala identity were primarily the most influential and powerful families in the kingdom. It is likely that it was such elements who are denoted by the term *mahajana* in the myth. In the ancient texts it did not carry the meaning that its phonetic equivalent *mahajanaya* conveys today, but denoted "the great men." Thus at this stage of its development the Sinhala consciousness was the consciousness of the ruling class. It probably had a regional tinge, at least initially, since, according to the myth, the original settlements founded by the Sihalas were on the banks of the Kadamba (Malvatu) and Gambhira (Kanadara?) rivers and in the surrounding region. It is worthy of note that the chronicles attribute a different origin to the settlements in the eastern and southeastern regions of the island. (*Mahavamsa*, 9. 7-11)

The Vijaya myth seeks to define the position of the Pulindas and their relationship with the Sinhala dynasty:

they live in the Malaya region with the assent of the king, Thereby acknowledging his suzerainty. Certain elements of the myth portray the relationship between the king and the "great men." It was the "great men" of the kingdom who protested about the violent and oppressive behaviour of Vijaya. They demanded that he be put to death and Sinhabahu was constrained to send him away in exile. In the *Divyavadana* and Hiuen Tsang II versions of the myth Simhala is a merchant who is selected by the people of his kingdom to be their lord. In the *Divyavadana* Simhala protests that he is only a trader, but the people insist that he accepts the kingship because he was the only capable person. (*Divyavadana*, p. 527) In the Hiuen Tsang II version Simhala is selected on account of his religious merit, wisdom, skill, virtue, loyalty and prudence. (Beal, 1958, p. 441) While these versions present the view that personal ability and qualities of character rather than ritual status should be the criteria that determines the suitability of a person for kingship, the *Mahavamsa* version seeks to present a markedly different point of view. It embodies the message that the *ksatriya* status of the ruling family marks them out from people of all other ritual categories. The story of the embassy sent to Madhura to fetch a *ksatriya* princess and Vijaya's treatment of Kuvanna serve to underline the point that only such a king who is a *ksatriya* and who also has a queen of the same *varna* status can be consecrated: others do not have a legitimate right to rule. Thus while the "great men" of non-*ksatriya* status may force the ruling family to govern justly without harassing them, they may not aspire to kingship. The discrepancies between different versions of the myth, reflecting probably their different social origins, point to the tensions within the dominant social group and the problems of political power in the country at this time.

It is also possible to see the Vijaya myth as an expression of a corpus of religious beliefs. The *yakkhas* and *raksasis* occupy a prominent position in many versions of the myth. In the words of Vijaya "men are ever in fear of non-human beings." Oblations (*bali*) are offered



to the *yakkhas* to placate them. The *Mahavamsa* version of the myth highlights the potency of sacralized thread as a charm which afforded protection against the *yakkhas*: it saved the lives of Vijaya's men. Uppalavanna is introduced as a god of the Buddhist pantheon vested with the protection of the island, and it is stated that it was the request of the dying Buddha that Vijaya and the island be protected which led to Uppalavanna being sent by Sakka, the king of the gods. The myth synchronises the arrival in the island of Vijaya and his retinue with the death of the Buddha. It also seeks to enunciate certain Buddhist virtues and to point out the "rewards" accruing to those who adhere to them: the lion was not harmed by the arrows shot by Sihabahu as long as he harboured feelings of loving kindness (*mettacitta*) in his heart but was killed the moment he was moved by wrath. At another level, the myth reflects the importance of certain places other than Anuradhapura as political centres. All the different versions of the myth seek to explain the name Sinhala, and indeed this was one of the basic functions of the myth. While it is possible to understand this myth at several such different levels, it is possible to see in its *Mahavamsa* version what Malinowski (1948, p. 145) termed a "charter," and in this sense, it is comparable with the myth of the visit of the Buddha that the present writer has analysed elsewhere. (Gunawardana, 1976) One of the primary social functions of the Vijaya myth was the validation of a particular socio-political order. It identifies certain major social groups in the island and seeks to locate their positions in the social order. The Sinhala consciousness presented in the myth was the product of caste (*jati*) ideology, for the service castes were excluded from membership of the Sinhala group. The Vijaya myth in the *Mahavamsa* also represents the embodiment of a state ideology which sought to unite the dominant elements in society and to bring them under a common bond of allegiance to the ruling house. When the island came to be called Sihaladipa or the island of the Sihalas, this name reflected the claim of the ruling house and this dominant social group to political power over the whole island. By implication, this ideology sought to relegate all

other social groups like service castes and the Pulindas to a subservient position. Evidently, chronicles like the *Mahavamsa* served as valuable media for the propagation of this ideology.

Invasions from South India posed a threat to the dominant position occupied by this group, and when powerful kingdoms of the Pandyas, the Pallavas and the Colas appeared in the South Indian political scene, these invasions were indeed a serious threat to their political power. The Sinhala ideology presented in the chronicles reflects the tension and antipathy aroused by this threat. It is particularly noteworthy that the chronicles present a version of history which had been moulded to conform to the needs of this ideology. For these chroniclers, all kings since the mythical Vijaya, were rulers of the whole island. It is only through a re-examination of the *Mahavamsa* in the light of evidence from the early Brahmi inscriptions and literary works like the *Dhatuvamsa*, the *Sihalavatthuppakarana* and the *Sahassa-vatthuppakarana*, that the process of political development in the island leading to the emergence of a unified kingdom can be reconstructed. Information from inscriptions at sites distributed over a wide area like Periya Puliyankulam, Occappukallu, Ambul-ambe, Yatahalena, Lenagala, Gonavatta, Bambaragala, Kandegamakanda, Kusalankanda, Olagamgala, Mottayakallu, Bovattegala, Kottadamuhela, Kolladeniya and Kirimakulgolla, when taken together with evidence in the literary sources mentioned above, point to a situation quite different from what the author of the *Mahavamsa* would have us believe. It is evident from information in these sources, that at the beginning of historical times there were several petty rulers holding sway over various parts of the island. Of these rulers, those at Anuradhapura were pre-eminent. Devanampiyatissa of Anuradhapura sent a delegation to the court of Asoka, held a consecration ceremony with the ritual goods provided by the latter and assumed the titles *devanampiya* and *maharaja*. There is no evidence, however, to show that the other rulers acknowledged his suzerainty or that he was more than a mere aspirant to overlordship over the whole island. (Gunawardana, 1971)

It is against this background that the campaigns of Dutthagamani, which form an integral and important element



in the Sinhala ideology, particularly in more recent times, have to be examined. In the *Mahavamsa*, Elara, against whom Dutthagamani waged war, was the ruler of the whole of northern Sri Lanka and members of Dutthagamani's lineage had been rulers of the entire Rohana kingdom ever since Mahanaga established his power at Mahagama. Dutthagamani is presented as waging war in the interest of Buddhism. His campaigns culminate dramatically with the capture of Anuradhapura after a duel fought in accordance with the *ksatriya* rules of chivalry. Thus a Buddhist prince of the Sinhala dynasty, who ruled over the southern principality conquers the northern principality ruled by a Tamil who, though known for his just rule, was yet a man of "false beliefs." This view of the chroniclers has influenced modern historical writings, and the chauvinist Sinhala writings have picked on these campaigns as representing the exemplary victorious war waged by the Sinhalese against the Tamils. However, even the author of the *Mahavamsa*, who was obviously transposing to an earlier period, conditions more typical of his own times, found it difficult to reconcile material available in his sources with this anachronistic picture he was trying to present. Some information in the *Mahavamsa* itself suggests that not all the people who fought against Dutthagamani were Tamils. For instance, Nandhimitta, a general in Dutthagmani's army, is said to have had an uncle who was a general serving Elara. (*Mahavamsa*, 23.4 – 5) Though the *Mahavamsa* tried to present Dutthagamani as the ruler of a unified Rohana fighting against the sole ruler of the northern plains, it is evident that the sources used by the chronicler carried accounts of Dutthagamani fighting against thirty – two different rulers. As the present writer has pointed out previously, (Gunawardana, 1971) the most plausible explanation of the available evidence is that Dutthagamani was a powerful military leader who unified the island for the first time after fighting against several independent principalities. His campaigns do not appear to represent a Sinhala-Tamil confrontation and, as noted already, the development of Sinhala consciousness is a phenomenon observable after

the formation of a unified kingdom ruled by the kings of Anuradhapura.

The Sinhala ideology elaborated in the account of the campaigns of Dutthagamani clearly reflects the influence of the religious identity which evolved with the expansion and consolidation of Buddhism in the island. Both the *Mahavamsa* and the *Culavamsa* present the view that support for the Sinhala dynasty against the Damilas is conducive to the glory of Buddhism. Dutthagamani in the *Mahavamsa* and Dhatusena in *Culavamsa* are both presented as waging war against the Damilas to restore Buddhism to its proper position. When describing the South Indian invasion of the fifth century, the *Culavamsa* states that all men of good birth (*jana kulina sabbe*) left the area occupied by the invaders to go and live in Rohana (*Culavamsa* 38. 11 – 2) And, after describing the victory of Dhatusena, the chronicle says that he "restored to its former place the *sasana* destroyed by the foe." (*Culavamsa* 38, 37)

The chronicle seeks to create the impression that there was a strong anti – South Indian feeling among the dominant elements in Sri Lankan society, but it is less than convincing. A few strophes after making the statements cited above it admits that some men of "good birth" did opt to serve the Tamil rulers. After capturing power, Dhatusena is said to have taken punitive action against those "men of good birth who had attached themselves to the Damilas and protected neither himself nor the *sasana*." (*Culavamsa* 38. 38 – 9) The claim that the Buddhist order was destroyed by the invaders is also not borne out by the inscriptional records of this period. They indicate that there were Buddhists among the invaders. Some of them were generous patrons of the Buddhist clergy and one of their kings bore the title Buddhadasa which meant "the servant of the Buddha." (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol III, p. 218: Vol. IV, p. 114)

It is only after the development in South India of a militant form of Hinduism, which adopted a pronounced hostile stance against both Buddhism and Jainism, that



Tamils would have been considered foes of the faith by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. The Sanskrit literary works composed by the Pallava king Mahendravarman I (A. D. 900 630) and such Tamil writings like the *Tiruvatavurar Puranam* and the *Periya Puranam* reflect the intensity of the hostility that the devotees of the Saiva faith harboured against the Buddhists and Jainas. Tirunanacampantar is said to have defeated the Buddhist inhabitants of the Potimankai settlement at debate and converted them to Saivism. It is also said that another Saiva saint, Manikkavacakar, participated in a similar debate Citamparam where he humiliated a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka. (Schomerus. 1925, pp. 155 264 – 80) It has been suggested that Tirunanacampantar lived in the seventh century, and Manikkavacakar has been assigned to the ninth century. (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955, pp. 405 – 7) However, in the earlier periods, there is no evidence of such hostility towards the Buddhists. Thus while the Buddhist identity was one which linked the Buddhists of Sri Lanka with coreligionists in South India and other parts of the Indian subcontinent, it is only after about the seventh century that prerequisite conditions matured making it possible to link the Sinhala identity with Buddhism and to present Tamils as opponents of Buddhism.

In the second instance where the term Sihala occurs in the *Mahavamsa*, Vattagamani is described as *Mahakalasihala* (*Mahavamsa*, 1959, 33. 43) Though Paranavitana preferred to see in this phrase an allusion to Yama (Paranavitana, 1958 pp. 61 – 7), its literal meaning is "the great black Sihala". It is also noteworthy that the father of Dutthagamani was called Kakavannatissa which means "Tissa the crow-coloured.' Both the father and son of king Mahasena bore the title *meghavanna* which meant "one with the colour of the rain cloud." The paintings and graffiti from Sigiri also provide valuable information on physical features of the upper rungs of Sri Lankan society at the time. The complexions of the ladies depicted in the paintings vary from a light yellow-brown to a deep blue or black colour. These ladies are richly adorned with jewellery including tiaras, earrings, necklaces and bangles. The paintings certainly depict

members of the highest social strata. The variety of physical types that they represent clearly indicates that the dominant social group at the time was not of a physically homogeneous type. The "amateur poets" who scribbled verses on the Mirror Wall at Sigiri were mostly giving expression to their admiration of the damsels in the paintings. These verses eveal a certain preference for ladies with a lighter complexion described as the '-golden hued" (*ranvan*) ones. Some of these poets considered those with other complexions beautiful and desirable. There were several admirers who wrote verses expressing their desire for the darker maidens, whose complexion was poetically compared to the hue of the blue lily (*mahanel*, i. e. *Nymphea stellata*). In a verse that has been often quoted, one damsel is compared to a blue *Katrola* (*Clitoria ternatea*) flower. (Paranavitana, 1956, v. 334) "When I remember the blue – lily - hued ones there is no sleep for me, O friend, I have become like unto an ass" another visitor to Sigiri laments in a poem scribbled on the wall. (V. 449) The fact that some preferred the dark to the light in complexion is evident from the *Saddharmalankara*, a literary work datable to about the beginning of the fifteenth century. In this work is to be found a story about a lady who performed several merit-worthy acts and wished that through the effects of the merit thus accumulated she should be born with the complexion of a blue lily in every successive birth. (*Saddharmalankara* p. 176) The *Dharmapradipika*, which has been assigned by most scholars to the end of twelfth century, also provides information on the ideas of physical beauty in early medieval Sri Lanka. This work presents a discussion on the five characteristics of female beauty. In its description of the skin characteristics of the ideal beauty, it refers to both the dark (*kaliya*) and the golden – hued (*helilla*) maidens in that order. The ideal beauty had to have a clear and uniform complexion, "untainted by other colours," and it could be either the colour of the blue lily or that of the *kinihiri* (*Cochlospermum religiosum*) flower. (*Dharmapradipika* p. 254) In literary works, objects of golden colour were compared with the *kinihiri* flower. The *Vesaturuda Sanne*, an exegetical work written in the period of Polannaruwa



kingdom, compares people clad in gold – coloured clothes and wearing golden ornaments to *kinihiri* trees in full bloom. It also states that *kinihiri* trees in bloom looked as if they were covered with golden nets. (*Vesaturuda Sanne*, pp. 19, 67) Thus preferences about skin pigmentation appear to have varied as would be expected in a physically heterogeneous society. The sources examined above refleet the rather unusual aesthetic values of a society in which there were not one, but two alternate ideals of physical type; black is beautiful, the *Dharmapradipika* asserts, and so is the "golden" hue. The *Buddhavamsa* reveals that these aesthetic values influenced even the Buddhist tradition. Popular tradition holds that the *Buddhavamsa* contains "the word of the Buddha," but the fact that it refers to the death of the Buddha, the distribution of his relics and even to relics venerated in Sri Lanka clearly shows that it is a later work composed probably in Sri Lanka. In its description of the chief disciples of the Buddha this work states that Sariputta was of the colour of the *koranda* flower which, according to the *Vesaturuda Sanne* (p. 67), was golden in colour, and that Moggallana's complexion was comparable to the black rain cloud and the blue lily. (*Buddhavamsa*, p. 5) Evidently, the "black" rain cloud and the "blue" lily are here supposed to denote the same complexion. It is particularly interesting to note that the two chief disciples of the Buddha are in this text representatives of the two main physical types. Thus these two physical types came to be not only idealized but also "enshrined" since the figures of two chief disciples are to be found up to the present day in Buddhist shrines scattered over many different parts of the island. It seems reasonable to suggest that this emphasis on these two physical types reflects the heterogeneous composition of the dominant social stratum.

It will have been evident from the preceding discussion that the social group brought together by the Sinhala consciousness does not appear to have coincided with a linguistic grouping in the island or to have represented a single physical type, and that it is only after about the

seventh century, that it could have been linked with a religious grouping. It is the social and political criteria which clearly stand out in examination of the factors that united the Sihalas. It is evident that at the time Dhatusena ascended the throne in the fifth century, the Sinhala consciousness was not strong enough to unite the leading elements in society in opposition to the South Indian invaders. At the end of the seventh century, Manavamma, a Sinhala contender for the throne, captured power with aid of the Pallavas, but the dynasty he founded soon proved to be capable of maintaining their independence and they successfully resisted intervention by powerful South Indian kingdoms for more than two centuries. This long period of political rivalry between the Sinhala and the South Indian kingdoms witnessed the rise and expansion of a militant and vigorous form of Hinduism in the South Indian kingdoms, displacing both Buddhism and Jainism. On the other hand, Buddhism continued to maintain its dominant position in the religious life of the people of Sri Lanka. These developments provided the prerequisite conditions for the growth of a tendency towards the convergence of the Buddhist and the Sinhala identities. From the time of Kasyapa V. (A. D. 914 - 23) kings begin to actively propagate the idea, implict in the chronicles, that they belong to the same lineage as the Buddha. (Gunawardana, 1979, p.p. 173-4) An inscription issued by Mahinda IV (956-72) claims that the Buddha had given the assurance that none but Bodhisattvas would become kings of Sri Lanka. (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. I. p. 237) Thus kings of Sri Lanka had to be not only Buddhists, but men destined to be Buddhas. Such ideas would have had considerable political potency at a time when the Sinhala kingdom was confronted with the threat from the Hindu kingdoms of South India. The success of the Sinhala rulers in defending their independence until the time of Mahinda V would have been due primarily to their achievement in utilizing these ideas to mobilize the leading elements in their kingdoms, particularly those who traditionally bore arms in support of their dynasty. However, even at this stage it is doubtful whether the Sinhala grouping and the Buddhist grouping in the island were yet



identical. While nearly all the Sinhala were Buddhists, there is still no evidence to suggest that the service castes were now being considered members of the Sinhala group.

The long period of Cola occupation in the island, spanning the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the intense rivalry between the South Indian and the Sinhala kingdoms would have been a factor which encouraged the extension of the Sinhala identity to cover a wider social group. However, there were impediments to such a development. Inscriptions from the period immediately after the Cola occupation reveal that caste (*jati*) distinctions had become so rigid that they even affected the organization of Buddhist ritual. According to a lithic record set up by Vijayabahu I (1017 - 70), he constructed two terraces on the summit of Sumanakuta. The upper terrace was reserved for men of "good birth" and was enclosed by a wall which had gates fitted with locks. He had a second terrace built on a lower elevation for those of "inferior caste" (*adhama jatin*) who came to worship the footprint of the Buddha. (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. II, pp. 202 - 18). Such arrangements for the performance of ritual at this important centre of pilgrimage reveal how sharply the divisions between the two main status groups were being emphasised.

Evidently, the intense political rivarly between the Cola and the Sinhala kingdoms in the time of Parakramabahu I (1153 - 86) affected even the religieux. Upto this time it was the *nikaya* affiliation which divided them, and these *nikaya* divisions had cut across political boundaries. Several monks from South India had produced commentarial works on Buddhist texts where they professed to follow the traditions of canonical interpretation of the Mahavihara *nikaya* at Anuradhapura. In the reign of Parakramabahu I, various Buddhist fraternities were unified under the leadership of Sariputta. (Gunawardana, 1979. pp. 313 - 37) Thus, for the first time, the *sangha* in Sri Lanka gave precedence to unity on the basis of a political and regional unit, rather than unity on the basis of sectarian affiliation. Sariputta's writings were severely criticised by Kassapa, a monk who

lived at the Naganana monastery situated "in the heart of the Cola kingdom" at Coladhinathapura. Sariputta's interpretations, he claimed, encouraged lapses in discipline in the Cola land and, as such, they had been rejected by the leading monks of that land who cleansed the *sangha* of monks who supported such views. (*Vimativinodani*, pp. 96–100) The tenor of this criticism implies that there was something more than mere disagreement on doctrinal matters. That a certain element of regional rivalry had come into these disputes is more clearly evident from the *Simalankara*, a work from the same period devoted to the problem of demarcating ceremonial boundaries. In this work the author declares his intention to vindicate the position of the Sinhalese monks. All those who knew the Vinaya rules and wished for the perpetuation of the *sasana*, he maintains, should accept the opinions of the Sinhalese monks which are in accordance with the scriptures and their commentaries. They should certainly reject the views of the Coliyans which were false and contrary to these. It was a Sinhalese monk, he claims, who wrote the *Simalankara* and its commentary. (*Simalankara*, pp. 42 - 3) It is evident from these polemical writings that while the Buddhist identity transcended political boundaries, attempts were being made during this period to mark out within this larger identity, the separate positions of the Cola and the Sinhala monks.

The political conditions of this period were favourable for the extension of the Sinhala identity, and it is evident that, by the time Gurulugomi wrote the *Dharmapradipika*, the term Sinhala had acquired a wider meaning. While reiterating the earlier view that the kings of the dynasty descended from Simhala, the father of Vijaya, were the primary group denoted by the term Simhala, Gurulugomi also gives three other connotations of the term. The island ruled by the dynasty received the name of the dynasty; the inhabitants of the island received the name of the island; and their language was called *Simhalabasa*. (*Dharmapradipika*, p. 55) Gurulugomi's view of a dynasty > island > inhabitants of the island > their language sequence in the extension



of the meaning of the term Sinhala reflects an important stage in the expansion of the Sinhala identity. It is noteworthy that unlike previous writers, he does not refer or allude to the separate position of the service castes. He further differs from them by stating that it was by being inhabitants of the island rather than being descendants of a particular group of people that those, other than the members of the ruling house, acquired the Sinhala identity. Thus it is evident that the term Sinhala had come to denote by this time "the inhabitants of the island," meaning probably the Sinhala - speaking population who were the preponderant element of the people in the island.

While the Sinhala identity was thus being extended to cover a wider group than in the previous period, there are indications that not all the members of the group within this period were Buddhists. The influence of Saivism lingered on during the period which followed Cola rule. This faith received the patronage of three successive rulers, i. e. Vijayabahu I, Vikramabahu and Gajabahu II. The *Culavamsa* claims that Gajabahu brought nobles of "heretical faith" from abroad and had his kingdom "filled with briers of heresy." (*Culavamsa 70. 53 - 4*) Tamil tradition claims that he was converted to Saivism. (*Cri Takcina kailaca Puranam*, p. 20) It has been suggested that both Vikramabahu and Gajabahu were Hindus. (Kiribamune, 1978, pp, 112 - 4). In its description of the invasion of Magha (1215), the *Pujavaliya* states that this invader compelled "the great men" to adopt false faiths (pp. 108 - 94) Liyanagamage has suggested that this is a reference to people being converted to the Virasaiva sect of Saivism. (Liyanagamage, 1968, p. 128) (4) The vehemence with which Vidagama Maitreya attacks Saivism and other faiths in his *Budugunalankaraya* (vv. 121 - 183), written in the fifteenth century, also points to the influence of these faiths amongst the Sinhala-speaking population at the time. It is evident from the preceding discussion that while it is possible to speak of a Sinhala variety of Buddhism during this period, as distinct from the Cola and other varieties of the Theravada, this does not imply that the terms Buddhist and Sinhala denoted the very

same group. These terms denoted two intersecting groupings, and, though there was a substantial population which came within both, there were people who belonged to one group, but not the other.

This period did not witness the growth of a Sinhala consciousness which could prevent the rise to power of kings who were not members of the Sinhala group. During the period between the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries, there are several instances of Kalinga and Tamil princes assuming royal power in Sri Lanka. The position of the kings of the Kalinga dynasty which came to power at the end of the twelfth century appears to have been challenged by South Indian as well as Sinhala contenders to the throne. Nissanka Malla, the first king of this dynasty, was a clever propagandist who used lithic records to propagate the view that *ksatriya* status and adherence to the Buddhist faith were essential prerequisites for kingship. He argued that non-Buddhists such as princes of Cola and Kerala origin, were unsuited to rule the island which belonged to the *sasana* and that it would be ludicrous for a man of the Govi caste to aspire to kingship as for a firefly to try to emulate the sun. (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. II, p. 114) It is noteworthy that to a certain extent Nissanka Malla was seeking to counter the Sinhala ideology by emphasising that it was not the Sinhala identity, but criteria related to religious affiliation and ritual status which determined the suitability of a person to be the king of the island.

The period of political disintegration which followed the collapse of the Polonnaruva kingdom witnessed significant changes in the composition of the island. The chronicles contain several references to these developments, but it is in works like the *Vittipot*, which have not received adequate attention from historians, that these events are described in detail. It is evident that there were several waves of immigration which brought not only South Indian linguistic groups like Demala, Malala, Kannada and Doluvara (Tulu) but also groups like Javakas from Southeast Asia. Myths of this period reflect the distribution of the immigrant



population over different parts of the island. (Obeysekera, 1970a). It was probably through a long process that these different linguistic groups came to be absorbed into the two main linguistic groups in the island. There were two kingdoms which were clearly the most prominent among the several diminutive polities which arose during this period. At times there were several politics in the Sinhala-speaking areas. Swept by political winds, the capital of the main kingdom shifted hastily from place to place until finally it came to rest in the central highlands. The other main kingdom was in Jaffna where immigrations would have added to existing populations to form the heaviest concentration of Tamil-speaking peoples. Although the establishment of a unified realm covering the whole island would have been the aim of many a potentate, it was achieved only in the reign of Parakramabahu VI (1412-67) who is said to have vanquished Sinhala, Demala, Malala, Rannada and Doluvara foes. (*Kokila Sandesa*, v 251).

Evidently, this was a period of cosmopolitan culture when fluency in six langnages was considered to be a desirable accomplishment by Sinhalese scholars. The hierarch of the Galaturumula fraternity who lived at the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth century, was the first person to be referred to by the title *sadbhasaparamesvara*, "the lord of six languages." (*Suryasataka Sannaya*, p. 567) The reign of Parakramabahu VI marks a high point in the development of cultural contact between the Sinhala and Tamil linguistic communities. Nannurutun Minisannas, a Tamil prince who was married to the king's daughter, composed the Sinhala lexicon *Namavaliya* (vv. 285-6). It is clear from this scholarly work that the author had attained a high level of proficiency in the Sinhala language. The author of the *Kokila Sandesa* spoke proudly of his ability to preach in both Sinhala and Tamil (v. 286). It was also a period when Tamil poems and songs were popular among the Sinhala community. According to the *Kokila Sandesa*, poems composed in Sinhala, Tamil, Pali and Sanskrit were recited at the court of Parakramabahu VI (v. 155) Maha Valigama was described by the same poet as a place where Tamil songs

were sung, and his description clearly reveals an appreciation for this genre of music (*savana pura pavasana demala gi Kokila Sandesa*, v. 55) The popularity of the cults of Ganapati (Ganesa) and Pattini was a factor conducive to the expansion of Tamil cultural influences among the Sinhalese. The *Parevi Sandesa*, written in the middle of the fifteenth century by Totagamuve Rahula, refers appreciatively to Tamil songs being sung at the temple of Ganapati in southern Sri Lanka (v. 140). The *Vayantimalaya*, a poetical work on the goddess Pattini, which has been assigned to the period of the Kotte kingdom, was a translation of a Tamil work. (Sannasgala, p. 286)

The interest of the Sinhalese literati in Tamil literature persisted during the period of the Kandyan kingdom when a significant number of Tamil works were translated from Tamil into Sinhala. Some of these like the *Mahapadaranga Jataka* were Buddhist works (Sannasgala. pp. 382 ff.) and point to the prevalence of Tamil literary works of Buddhist inspiration even at this late date. Kirimatiyave, the scholar responsible for some of the translations made during this period, speaks of his knowledge of several South Indian scripts. (Sannasgala, p. 347). South Indian scripts were used at times even to write the Sinhala language. (Sundar Raman, pp. 194–5) The Grantha and Tamil scripts were used by some leading figures among the Sinhalese officials in the Kandyan kingdom even in their signatures. (6)

The Sinhala consciousness persisted during this period, particularly among certain sections of the literati, as is evident from works like the *Pujavaliya* and the *Culavamsa*. However, unlike in certain earlier periods, the Sinhala ideology does not appear to have been propagated by the state, and it does not seem to have even received persistent support from kings. Some instances have been cited by certain scholars as pointing to the influence of the Sinhala consciousness. The death of Parakramabahu VI was followed by a struggle for power, and when Prince Sapumal, the governor of the northern regions, captured power and ascended the throne, he faced an uprising in the southern part of the kingdom. Paranavitana



has suggested that this uprising, which is referred to as *simhalasamge* in the Dadigama inscription (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. III, p. 280) and as *simhalaperali* in the *Rajavaliya* (p. 49), was "an upsurge of national sentiment" amongst the Sinhalese against a ruler of Malayali extraction. (Paranavitana. 1960, p. 679) However, this appears to be too sweeping a conclusion to draw from the name giving to the uprising. More recently, Somaratne (1975, pp. 142–8) has suggested that it was a rebellion organised by the supporters of Viraparakramabahu whom Sapumal deposed. Viraparakramabahu was a prince of Tamil descent, being the son of Prince Minisannas, but he had been chosen as the successor by Parakramabahu VI. Clearer evidence of expression of Sinhala consciousness and antipathy towards the Nayakkar rulers of Kandy is to be found in the *Kirala Sandesa* and the *Vaduga Hatana* cited by Sannasgala (pp. 466–8, 529–31) and Dharmadasa (1979). These two works were written by a supporter of Ahalepola, a contender to the throne, after the last Nayakkar king had been captured by the British. In these two works the author attacks the last king for his false beliefs and calls him a "villainous, wicked and heretical eunuch of a Tamil." Obviously, this attack on the king was designed to justify Ahalepola's betrayal of the king and his treasonable dealings with the British. Dharmadasa argues that this expression of "Sinhala Buddhist" sentiments was not an isolated incident and that there was similar "ideological motivation" behind previous instances of opposition to Nayakkar rulers. However, it is difficult to agree that the evidence he cites is adequate for such a conclusion. Dharmadasa cites two previous instances of opposition to Nayakkar rulers. The first was when the last Sinhala king decided to designate his brother-in-law, a Nayakkar prince, as his successor. Some nobles supported the claims of Prince Unambuve, a son of the king by a Sinhalese lady who was not of *ksatriya* status. However, ritual status turned out to be the decisive criterion, and even the leading courtier who supported Unambuve's claims, later accepted office under the Nayakkar king. (Dewaraja, 1972, pp. 81–2). In the second instance, a section of the nobility plotted to kill Kirtti Sri Rajasimha, who is described in one source as "a Tamil heretic." Though it

could be argued that such a description reflects the presence of a "Sinhala-Buddhist" consciousness, it is noteworthy that the work in which this description occurs was written not during the period of Nayakkar rule but in the reign of the Queen Victoria when, as will be seen later, an altogether different intellectual milieu had come into being. It is also significant that the leaders of the plot could not decide on a Sinhala noble to replace the Nayakkar king, and were attempting to win the throne for a Thai prince.

Rebellions led by sections of the nobility were not uncommon occurrences even when Sinhala kings were on the throne. On the other hand, it is significant that a small band of Nayakkars from South India did manage to remain on the throne of Kandy for almost a century and the Sinhala consciousness could not unite the nobility to depose them. During this epoch the Sinhala consciousness did not possess the class characters of an earlier epoch. It may be also suggested that cultural cosmopolitanism would have contributed to the weakening of the Sinhala consciousness and that the feudal ethics would have further diminished its influence. Unlike the ruling class of the Anuradhapura kingdom, the Kandyan nobility did not possess a powerful unifying ideology strengthened by myths. The feudal ideology of the Kandyan kingdom emphasised "noble" (*radala*) status to such an extent that in effect the *radala* constituted a sub-caste. However, the *radala* nobility was a group whose unity was severely undermined by factional rivalry. In this atmosphere of intense rivalry only such a person could be king whose ritual status placed him well above the *radala*. The failure of Unambuve and the choice of the Thai prince highlight this situation. The success of the Nayakkars in maintaining their position was due as much to the divisions among the nobility as to the fact that they were the only *ksatriyas* in the island. Apart from the ideology of status, the other major ideological influence was Buddhism. All Nayakkars had to, at least overtly, declare adherence to the Buddhist faith. Thus it is evident that the decisive criteria of the legitimacy of power had been derived from principles related to ritual status and religious affiliation rather than membership of the Sinhala



group. Owing to a combination of factors, the ideology of ritual status gained such an influential position in the last century of the Kandyan period that it in effect disqualified members of the Sinhala group from assuming kingship.

It was during the period of colonial rule that the Sinhala consciousness underwent a radical transformation and began to assume its current form. In developing their group consciousness the social classes created by colonial rule drew as much on European thought as on their own past traditions. The period during which the modern Sinhala consciousness evolved witnessed the rise into prominence of racialist theories in Europe. These theories were particularly influential in the study of Asian languages and history. William Jones' lecture on the structural affinities between Indian and European languages, published in 1788, marked the beginning of a new trend of thought in both Asia and Europe. Racial theories followed closely on the heels of theories of linguistic affinity, and the relationship between languages was explained as reflecting the common blood of the speakers of those languages. In 1819 Friedrich Schlegel used the term "Aryan" to designate the group of people whose languages were thus structurally related. (Poliakov, 1971, p. 193) The new racial theory which spoke of a common origin of the non - Semitic peoples of Europe and India had many enthusiastic supporters. Hegel hailed the theory of the affinity of the European languages with Sanskrit, referring to it as "the great discovery (*die grosse Entdeckung*) in history." comparable to the discovery of a continent. It revealed he stated, the historic relationship between the German and Indian peoples. For Hegel, "the dispersion of these peoples, starting from Asia, and their distinct evolution beginning with the same ancestry," were "irrefutable facts." (*Unwidersprechliches Faktum*, Hegel, 1955 p. 163)

If the Aryan theory found an influential supporter in Hegel, in Max Muller it found its most effective propagandist. In his writings Muller used the term "Aryan race" very often, and some of his research efforts were directed towards locating "the cradle of our race" and the

identification of languages classifiable within the Aryan group. His career spanned more than half a century, and his standing as one of the foremost scholars in Oriental languages added authority to his views. Muller considered the affinity between languages to be indicative of the origin of the speakers of those languages from common racial "stock". It was his view that the same blood flowed in the veins of both the Englishmen and the Bengalis, (Huxley, 1890, p. 281, n. 1) and in his later writings he described himself as "the person mainly responsible for the use of the term Aryan in the sense of Indo-European." (Muller, 1879, p. 333) Racialist thought owed as much to ethnology as it did to comparative philology, and contemporaries of Muller like Knox and Gobineau were propounding a theory of "the white races." (Poliakov, pp. 232-8) By about 1875, as Maine observed in his Rede Lecture, a new theory of race, derived primarily from the researches on philology, had come into being.

In the later years of his career Muller did have some misgivings about the use of the term "Aryan race." "To me an ethnologist who speaks of Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and Aryan hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or a brachycephalic grammar," he wrote in his *Biography of Words* published in 1888. "Aryan, in scientific language, is utterly inapplicable to race," he further stated. "It means language and nothing but language; and if we speak of Aryan race at all, we should know that it means no more than X + Aryan speech." (Muller, 1888, pp. 120-1) While this passage reveals Muller's strong reaction to the confusion resulting from the use of common terms by philologists and ethnologists it is worth noting that the last conditional clause somewhat diminishes the emphatic ring of the preceding statement. In fact, Muller continued to use the term race, and the very essay in which these passages occur was devoted to a search for what he termed "the cradle of our race." (p. 91) He was not very precise about the use of the term and he did not specify what exactly he meant when he said that race was "X + language." Those



who had been influenced by Muller's earlier views were even less inclined to avoiding confusion between race and language. The theory of the Aryan race was by this time too well established to be shaken by such a statement. Muller's later work cited above did not undermine the race theory, and, on the other hand, it contributed to the popularity of the mystical search for "the original home" of the Aryans, and the "study" of its expansion which seems to have been conceived in terms evocative of the expansion of the political power and the language of European states in more recent times. (See Muller, 1888, pp. 91-3)

No traces of the influence of the Aryan theory are to be found in William Knighton's *The History of Ceylon*, published in 1845, or Charles Pridham's *An Historical, Political and Statistical Account of Ceylon and its Dependancies*, published in 1849. Knighton referred to the similarities between the inhabitants of India and Sri Lanka which he thought pointed to immigrations from the neighbouring subcontinent (pp. 2-4) It was Pridham's conjecture (pp. 20-2) that the population of the island represented a fusion of immigrants from India and from China or Siam.

B. C. Clough who compiled the first Sinhala-English Dictionary, published in parts in 1821 and 1830, was the first writer to present the view that the Sinhala language was derived from Sanskrit. (Clough, p. viii) But this view was not easily accepted by some exponents of the Aryan theory. Christian Lassen, whose influential work, *Indisches Alterthumskunde* was published in 1847, distinguished Sinhala from the Aryan languages of the North Indian peoples (*die Arischen Inder*) and listed it with the South Indian languages. (pp. 362 - 3). James de Alwis used the introduction to his edition of the *Sidath Sangarawa*, published in 1852, to present a view which, though basically similar to Clough's, took a position different from Clough on the nature of the relationship between Sanskrit and Sinhala. De Alwis was aware of the researches of William Jones and Franz Bopp. He argued that Sinhala shared a common origin with Sanskrit; it was not, however, a dialect of

Sanskrit. De Alwis' hesitant presentation of his argument reveals that his views were not clearly formed at this time: "To trace therefore the Singhalese to one of the Northern family of languages, and to call it a dialect of Sanskrit, is apparently far more difficult than to assign to it an origin common with the Telingu, Tamil, and Malayalim in the Southern family.....the Singhala appears to us either a kindred language of Sanskrit, or one of the tongues..... which falls under the head of the Southern class. Yet upon the whole we incline to the opinion that it is the former." (p. xlvi) In his work published in 1859, James Emerson Tennent was more inclined to agree with Lassen, and spoke of "unequivocal proof" of the affinity of Sinhala with "the group of languages still in use in the Deccan; Tamil, Telingu and Malayalam," adding, however, that Sinhala appeared to have borrowed terms pertaining to science and art from Sanskrit. (Tennent, 1859, p. 328)

The years that followed saw the publication of two major works both of which wielded a deep influence on the evolution of the Sinhala consciousness. In 1861 Muller published his *Lectures on the Science of Language* and in this work (p. 60) he declared that "careful and minute comparison"had enabled him "to class the idioms spoken in Iceland and Ceylon as cognate dialects of the Aryan family of languages." While Muller's verdict wielded a decisive influence over the Sri Lankan literati, Caldwell's study of the comparative grammar of South Indian languages was certainly another major factor behind the hardening of opinion around the Aryan theory. In his work published in 1856 Caldwell presented a theory which was both a counter and a complement to the Aryan theory. Caldwell used the term Dravidian to designate what he termed "a family of languages," and this was the first time that the term had been used in this sense. According to Caldwell, the Dravidian "family" included six "cultivated dialects" (Tamil, Malayalam, Telingu, Canarese, Tulu, Kadagu) and six "uncultivated dialects." (p. 3-6) It was also Caldwell's opinion that there was "no direct affinity" (p. 109) between the languages of the Sinhalese and the Tamils.



De Alwis' essay of 1866 on the origin of the Sinhala language reflects the new climate of opinion that had set in. Not only does he refer to "the Aryan invasions" in this essay, thereby presenting what was to become a popular interpretation of the Vijaya myth, but also he seeks to prove, citing both Caldwell and Muller, that Sinhala belonged to "the Arian or Northern family, as contradistinguished from Dravidian, or the Southern class of languages." (p. 143) Like many who were influenced by Muller's theories, he was not very careful about making distinctions between race and language. "Though the complexion of the Sinhalese presents different shades," he wrote (pp. 150-1), "the 'copper colour' is that which prevails over the rest, and this it would seem is the colour of the Aryan race, so much honoured by Manu (ch. iv, sutra 130) when he declared it an offence to pass over even the shadow of the copper-coloured man." Thus at a time when the Aryan theory was gaining general acceptance in Europe, de Alwis was claiming Aryan status not only for the Sinhala language, but also for the speakers of that language.

The Aryan theory provided a section of the colonial peoples of South Asia with a prestigious "pedigree": it elevated them to the rank of their rulers, even though the relationship was a distant and tenuous one. The term Arya had great appeal also because of its previous religious associations. In Sinhala the term *caturaryasatyaya* denoted "the four noble truths" of Buddhism. *Arya-astangikamarga* denoted "the eightfold path" of spiritual advancement and *ariyapuggala* were individuals known for spiritual attainments. In the *Culavamsa* the term *ariya* had been used to denote a group of people, but it is remarkable that in this instance it denoted people who were clearly distinguished from the Sinhalese. In its description of the reign of Bhuvanekabahu I (1272-1284), the chronicle distinguishes the Ariya mercenaries from the Sihala soldiers. (*Culavamsa*, (90. 16-30) No Sinhalese kings have been referred to as Ariya and, interestingly enough, it was the dynasty which ruled over the Tamil kingdom in Jaffna who called themselves *Arya Cakravarti* or "Arya emperors." It is an irony of history

that in later times it was the Sinhalese who came to be associated with the term Arya and were, as such, distinguished from the Tamil speakers.

The classification of the Sinhala language in the Aryan group received the support of several influential writers including Childers (1874-6), Goldschmidt (1875), and Kuhn (1885). Meanwhile, as in Europe, in Sri Lanka, too, the exponents of racial theories received strong support from physical anthropology. M. M. Kunte's lecture on Ceylon, delivered in 1879, was one of the most important sources of support. "There are, properly speaking, representatives of only two races in Ceylon – Aryans and Tamilians, the former being divided into descendants of Indian and Western Aryans," Kunte declared, adding that he had discovered that "the formation of the forehead, the cheek-bones, the chin, the mouth and the lips of the Tamilians are (sic) distinctly different from those of the Ceylonese Aryans." (Kunte, 1879, p. 9) C. F. and P. B. Sarasin (1886) identified three principal "well distinguishable" races in Sri Lanka: the Sinhalese, the Tamil and the Veddas, and they believed that the Tamils were more closely related to the Veddas than the Sinhalese. Rudolph Virchow (1885, 1886), too, tended to agree that there were three races in Sri Lanka. He considered "the Sinhalese race" to be the result of a mixture of Vedda elements and immigrants from India. There were resemblances between these two groups, but they were both distinct from the Tamils. Though the Sinhalese were "a mixed race" there was no doubt that "the Sinhalese face" was "an importation from the Aryan provinces of the Indian continent." (p. 490) These theorists disagreed on the position of the Vedda group and its relationship with the other two groups they had identified, but the views of Kunte and Virchow added strength to the opinion that the Sinhalese were either Aryans or "a mixed race,, derived from the fusion of the Aryans and the aboriginal inhabitants in the island. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, linguistic groups were being given new definitions in terms of physical characteristics which were supposed to be specific to those groups. The Sinhala and Tamil identities acquired thereby a racial dimension.



These new theories were not easily admitted into the history books. A. E. Blaze's *A History of Ceylon for Schools*, published in 1900, does not show their influence. However, there is evidence from about the end of the nineteenth century that these theories were gaining wide popularity. In December 1897, a magazine called *Buddhist* carried an article entitled "The Aryan Sinhalese." A booklet called *Aryan Sinhalese Names* was published in 1899. In 1910 A. E .R. Ratnaweera founded the magazine named *The Aryan*. If history books had reservations about the Aryan theory at the beginning of the century, they had begun to overcome these reservations by the 1920s. Blaze's book was revised though with obvious hesitation, to accommodate the new theory, and the mythical founder of the Sinhala kingdom was introduced as "believed to be of Aryan race." (p. 9) H. W. Codrington, whose *Short History of Ceylon*, was published in 1926, accepted the Aryan origin of the Sinhalese, but ventured to suggest that their original Aryan blood had been very much diluted through intermarriage: 'Vijaya's followers espoused Pandyan women and it seems probable that in course of time their descendants married with the people of the country on whom they imposed their language. Further dilution of the original Aryan blood has undoubtedly taken place in later ages, with the result that, though the Sinhalese language is of North Indian origin, the social system is that of the south." (p. 10)

A few writers expressed their reservations about this trend of thought that was becoming predominant. "Whether the Sinhalese language is a language with an Aryan structure and an Aryan glossary, or a language with a Dravidian structure with an Aryan glossary has divided scholars, and must await a thorough philological investigation," Ponnambalam Arunachalam observed in 1907 (p. 333). W. F. Gunawardhana was more forthright with his criticism and, in a lecture delivered at Ananda College on September 28, 1918, presented the view that in grammatical structure Sinhalese was Dravidian though its vocabulary was mainly Aryan. In a paper entitled "The Aryan Question in Relation to India," published in 1921, he further developed this view.

He pointed out that it was under Max Muller's influence that the Sinhalese claims to membership of the Aryan race had been put forward. While reiterating his earlier views about the affinity between Sinhala and Dravidian languages, he tried to argue that the Sinhalese were "a Dravidian race slightly modified by a Mongoloid strain and an Aryan wash." (pp. 44-8) It is noteworthy that while Gunawardhana questioned the classification of the Sinhalese as Aryans his arguments were based on the concept of the Aryan and Dravidian racial categories. His views provoked a lengthy "refutation" by C. A. Wijesinha who quoted Muller, Kunte and Havell to conclude that the Sinhalese "have hitherto been classified as an Aryan race, and will therefore continue to be classified as Aryan." (Wijesinha, 1921, p. 110) In *The Early History of Ceylon*, published in 1932, G. C. Mendis also made an attempt to correct this line of thinking by pointing out that Aryan and Dravidian were not racial categories but merely groups of languages. (pp. 15-6) Coming as it did from a person who had studied in Germany in the period of the rise of Nazism, it was indeed a remarkable contribution. Unfortunately, his views lacked clarity; Mendis himself confused language with race, speaking of "the Sinhalese race" in the same page and of "Tamil blood" in the second edition (p. 10) of this work. From about the 1920s racialist writings in Sinhala take a vehemently anti - Tamil stance, and they select the Duttha-Gamani - Elara episode for special treatment. V. B. Vatthuhamy's *Dutugamunu - Elara Mahayuddha Kathalankaraya* was one of the first works of this genre. This poem, published in 1923, reveals an intense antipathy towards the Tamils which was to become a prominent ingredient in the Sinhala ideology of the following period.

If in earlier historical epochs the Buddhist identity reflected a cosmopolitan outlook and extended beyond political boundaries to include co-religionists in different kingdoms, in the twentieth century a new term, "Sinhalese Buddhist" comes into use to denote a group of people in the island who are distinguished from the Sinhalese of the other faiths. Anagarika Dharmapala was probably the first



person to use the term. He inaugurated the publication of the newspaper *Simhala Bauddhaya* in 1906. One of the points emphasised by Dharmapala was the need for a leadership, both among religieux and the laity, to direct "the ignorant, helpless Sinhalese Buddhists." (Dharmapala, 1965, pp. 519 - 21) The portrayal of "the Sinhalese Buddhists" as an underprivileged group had a certain basis in fact in that, under colonial rule, governmental patronage had favoured Christians, particularly those converted to the Anglican faith. The need to struggle for the legitimate rights of the Sinhalese Buddhists was to become an essential element of the Sinhalese Buddhist ideology. And, since this group was the largest in the island, the leadership that Dharmapala looked for was not hard to find, particularly after universal suffrage was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1931.

In the context of the socio - economic transformations taking place under colonial rule, the Sinhala consciousness found it possible to overcome some of the limitations which prevented its expansion in its previous historical forms. Though the Sinhala identity had been "extended" earlier to cover "the inhabitants of the island" it is during this period that it entered the consciousness of the masses, bringing together that section of the population belonging to the Sinhala linguistic group through a consciousness overarching their local, regional and caste identities. This consciousness developed among this group of people an appreciation of their common culture. It infused the nationalist movement with certain anti - imperialist potentialities. However, in its varied aspects the Sinhala ideology does not lend itself to being categorised simply as an anti-imperialist ideology. In fact, it was also used to serve a contradictory purpose. Dharmapala extolled the past greatness of the Sinhala Aryans "who had never been conquered." but what he demanded was "self - government under British protection." (Dharmapala, p. 517) On the other hand, there were certain propagandists of the Sinhala ideology like Ratnaweera, the editor of *The Aryan*, who took great pains to dissociate the Sinhalese from the militant nationalists of Bengal and stated: "It is a

consolation to see..... that we are governed by an Aryan nation." (*The Aryan*, Vol. I, No. 2: editorial) It is not surprising that such an ideology did not produce an anti-imperialist movement of mass proportions.

However, it is necessary to emphasise that the weakness of the nationalist movement cannot be explained only in terms of the ideology, and that the ideology was itself a reflection of the nature and the limitations of the socio-economic changes that had taken place. While British rule undermined certain aspects of precolonial social relations, it did not set in motion that process observable in European history, which swept aside precapitalist institutions and "lumped together into one nation" different social groups, subordinating all other identities to the unifying national ideology of the bourgeoisie. That European process derived its motive power from a particular combination of an industrial bourgeoisie and a centralizing market. (Marx and Engels p. 38) The nascent bourgeoisie of the period of colonial rule in Sri Lanka was a weak bourgeoisie, nurtured by and dependent on foreign capital. Its weakness was reflected in the poverty of its culture, especially in its failure to develop a unifying national ideology, overarching the identities derived from previous historical epochs. The dominant ideas of the culture of this class represented a combination of ideas borrowed from contemporary Europe and from earlier epochs of the island's history. Those borrowed from contemporary Europe came more from the ideological armoury of racialism than from the rich stocks of humanism. Even Buddhist leaders like Dharmapala are found using the phraseology of anti-Semitism which was then becoming increasingly evident in a genre of European writings. In his contribution to the *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, published in 1908, Dharmapala speaks of "the glorious inheritance of Aryan ancestors, uncontaminated by Semitic and savage ideas." (Dharmapala, p. 487) In this new intellectual milieu the Sinhala ideology inherited from the past came to be refashioned and infused with racialism.



The Sinhala ideology has reflected the interests and aspirations of the element which has served as its main propagandists, i. e. the Sinhala-educated literati, and this has made it difficult to recognize its primary social function of mobilizing the Sinhala masses under the leadership of the Sinhala bourgeoisie. In addition to this "unifying" role, the Sinhala ideology has also played a "divisive" role. While it has been antithetical to the development of a broad nationalist movement and has thereby contributed to its weakness in its present form, the Sinhala ideology is a factor which divides the bourgeoisie. It has confronted the bourgeoisie with the critical problem of maintaining their class unity while resorting, for the purpose of mass mobilization, to the propagation of an ideology which is disintegrative in its effect on that very class and its state. However, the crisis represented by the conflict of identities is not limited to the bourgeoisie and has affected other classes as well. The Sinhala ideology and other similar group ideologies have left a deep and debilitating impact on particularly the working class by dividing it sharply and by hampering the development of its class consciousness.

It will have been evident from the preceding survey that the nature of the Sinhala identity as well as the relationship of the group brought together by this identity with other groupings based on religion, ritual status and language varied in different periods of history. Thus all these groupings presented historically variable intersecting social divisions. Identities based on ritual status and religion can be traced back to the most ancient historical documents available in Sri Lanka. The Sinhala identity in its earliest historical form bears the imprint of its origin in the period of state formation, in association with the ruling dynasty and its immediate social base. It is only by about the twelfth century that the Sinhala grouping could have been considered identical with the linguistic grouping. The relationship between the Sinhala and the Buddhist identities was even more complex. There is a close association between the two identities, but at no period do they appear to have coincided exactly to denote the self-same group of people. (6) As Jacobsen observed

with reference to Sumerian history, religion and language provided the bases for distinct identities, but it is difficult to group these distinct features in a convenient "bundle." (Jacobsen, 1960, pp. 64–5)

Our survey highlights the role that the literati, the group which occupies the misty regions on the boundaries of class divisions, played in identity formation in ancient as well as modern times. In selecting and reformulating myths and in giving them literary form, the literati played a significant role in the development of Sinhala ideology in ancient society. They fashioned a version of history in conformity with the dominant ideology of their society. This intellectual role was not one that was independent of, or unrelated to, the structure of power. Though it may be rash to generalize about the entire literati on the basis of the evidence in the Pali chronicles, it can be confidently asserted that these chronicles reveal the important role of at least a section of the literati in the formulation and propagation of a state ideology in ancient and early medieval society.

The history of the development of the Sinhala ideology since the nineteenth century reveals the formidable role that the study of "dead languages" and "the remote past" has played in shaping mass consciousness and thereby in the moulding of the present. It was the study of Oriental languages, particularly Sanskrit, and of comparative philology that initiated in the nineteenth century a trend which came to wield such a decisive influence on contemporary mass consciousness. In Sri Lanka the discipline of history was initially a reluctant draftee, but it is now firmly entrenched within this ideological framework. The depth of the impact of this ideological current becomes evident even from a cursory review of recent research on Sri Lanka in those disciplines categorized as the humanities and the social sciences which perform a crucial social function in either validating or refashioning current ideology. The ability of these disciplines to grow out of the deformations derived from the impact of racialism and communalism would depend on the extent to which those engaged in research and teaching



recognize the social function of their disciplines and develop an awareness of the ideological underpinnings of research and other academic work.

## Notes

1. The eighteen groups of *pesakaraka* are comparable with the *astadasajati* in South Indian records. (See Fleet, 1876, p. 52) The chronicles record instances of kings assigning *pessakaraka* (var. *pessiya*) to serve at the monasteries. The groups denoted by this term included craftsmen as well as those who performed service functions with a "low" ritual ranking. (Gunawardana, 1979, pp. 119–20)
2. I have borrowed the term from Obeysekere (1970a)
3. While noting that some of the tales in the *Divyavadana* had been translated into Chinese in the third century A. D., Winternitz (pp. 285–6) has assigned this work to the fourth century A. D.
4. Liyanagamage (1968, p. 121) prefers to interpret the term *Mahajana* in this context as "the people."
5. There are several instances of the nobility using the Tamil and the Grantha scripts or a combination of these and the Sinhala scripts in their signatures. See. for instance, the signature of Dumabara Rajakaruna Mudiyanse in documents dated in the years 1688 and 1714 of the Saka era. (National Archives Documents Nos. 5/63/673 and 12)
6. Obeyesekere (1979) presents a differeent view about the relationship between the Sinhala and the Buddhist identities.

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# The Dutthagamani-Elara Episode: A Reassessment

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## I

History, as Edward Hallett Carr states "is a continuous process of inter-action between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past."[1] Carr therefore recommended to his students the study of the historian before turning to study the facts handled by him.[2] The 'facts' of early Sri Lankan history are mostly found in the chronicles of the island, the priestly authors of which were preoccupied with the theory and practice of religion. They took religion to be the supremely important factor in all affairs and recorded most things relating to it, but little else. It is no surprise therefore that the Dutthagamani – Elara episode of Sri Lankan history was treated by them chiefly from a religious point of view.

With the dawn of the modern era a 'national consciousness' became pronounced in most countries of the world. In small plural societies like in Sri Lanka however, it did not reach full maturity. For most Sri Lankans 'race' and 'religion' were more important than the 'nation' in its wider connotations. Consequently, writers including historians, elevated the brief spells of fighting between military adventurers with their small armies in early days of pioneering and colonization into racial and religious wars. They also introduced 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' differences into history and the Dutthagamani-Elara saga received treatment befitting these circumstances. A re-assessment of the historical treatment of this episode, becomes important therefore not for the glorification of the past nor for emancipation from it; but for the greater understanding of the past as well as of the present.



The *Dipavamsa*, our earliest extant record of historical tradition, attributed to the middle of the fourth century A. D.,[3] contains only a brief reference to Dutthagamani Abhaya and Elara. It is interesting to note here that Sena and Guttika, the earliest invaders from South India are referred to as Damilas in this account, but Elara is not identified as such. It merely states that the *Kshatriya* prince named Elara, having killed Asela, ruled righteously for fourty-four years. In its recording of events, the *Dipavamsa* states further that the prince named Abhaya, the son of Kakavanna, supported by ten warriors, overcame and killed thirty-two kings and thereafter ruled for twenty four years.[4] The objective of the *Dipavamsa* was to relate the history of the visits of the Buddha and the introduction of Buddhism into the island which "existed as Sihala after the lion."[5] Thus the author of the *Dipavamsa* gave articulation to the Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness which was strengthened by subsequent chroniclers. Neither at the time of the writing of the *Dipavamsa*, nor during the one or two centuries prior to it, did Sri Lanka experience South Indian invasions; Sinhala and Tamil communities living in the island seem to have existed as best as they could without conflicte This may explain in part the brief and dispassionate natur. of the narration of events regarding Elara and Dutthagamani by the author of the *Dipavamsa*.

However, the picture appears to have changed completely in the period prior to the writing of the *Mahavamsa*. The *Mahavamsa* is thought to have been written by a monk named Mahanama of the Mahavihara fraternity in the early years of the sixth century A. D., perhaps during the reign of Moggallana I (491–508).[6] It was compiled "for the serene joy and emotion of the pious" and was more a national epic of the Sinhala Buddhists of the orthodox *Theravada* sector than a dynastic history of the island. A few decades before the writing of this chronicle, the country witnessed the rule of six Tamils; Pandu, Parinda, Khudda Parinda, Tiritara, Dathiya and Pithiya (428–455). The exact place of origin of these Tamils is uncertain. The name Pandu of the first of these rulers, has given rise to the view that they

came from the Pandya country. The Sinhala sources, the *Pujavali* and the *Rajavali* refer to them as being Tamils from the Cola country. The period in South Indian history from about the fourth century A. D. to about the middle of the sixth century is usually referred to as the Kalabhra interregnum and according to Tamil tradition, the Kalabhras kept the Colas and Pandyas in subjection. Perhaps the incursion of Tamils into Sri Lanka in the fifth century, which brought the island under foreign rule for a little over a quarter of a century, was not unconnected with the disturbed conditions that prevailed in South India at the time. The *Culavamsa* expressely states that Tamil rule did not extend to the southern part of the island, namely Rohana, where the Sinhala nobles had sought refuge. But epigraphic evidence suggests that the rule of at least some of the Tamil kings extended beyond the limits to which the chronicler confines their authority.[7]

Thus it seems that when the *Mahavamsa* was written, the element of conflict in the relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamils had crystallized. The political threat posed by the Tamil feudal chiefs would have been fresh in the minds of the Sinhalese, and this background would have had some influence on *bhikkhu* Mahanama, the Sinhala-Buddhist author of the *Mahavamsa*. He was alive and sensitive to the occasional threats posed by Tamil chiefs to Sinhala sovereignty, and by heretical believers to the Mahavihara tradition. For him, not merely non-Buddhists but even those who supported heterodox Buddhist establishments opposed to the orthodox Mahavihara were heretics.[8] A dominant purification theme that suggests Sri Lanka should be free from all heretics is found throughout in the *Mahavamsa*. It is no wonder then, that the author selected Dutthagamani, who unified the whole island under one banner for the first time in history and was the patron of the Mahavihara establishment as the ideal king.

Gamani is first introduced in the *Mahavamsa* at the point of his death in his former life. A meritorious *Samanera* (a novice) he concedes at his death-bed to the pleas



of Viharadevi, the barren Queen of Kakavanna Tissa of Magama, to be reborn as her son.[9] Thus, entering life with a pre-established record of meritorious action, Gamani is born. In this saga the *Mahavamsa* chronicler has portrayed a substantive image of Gamani as an up-and-coming religio-nationalist leader. When Gamani is twelve years old. his full potential for ideal kingship is evinced in a gesture precipitated by his father's request that he should never fight against the Tamils. It is narrated that when the young prince, enraged and frustrated, lay crouched upon his bed, his mother questioned him as to why he lay so; whereupon he replied comparing his bed to the island, "Over there beyond the river are the Tamils; here on this side is the sea; how can I lie with outstretched limbs ?"[10]

It is important to examine whether the *Mahavamsa* rhetoric provides a clear picture of the historical situation. According to the *Mahavamsa*, the Tamils were represented by Elara of noble descent (as opposed to *kshatriya* descent in the *Dipavamsa*, who arrived here from the Cola country.[11] There is no evidence as to the composition of his garrisons and the strength of his army, However, unless Elara had some support in Sri Lanka, it may not have been easy for him to occupy the throne at Anuradhapura for such a long period. As subsequent history shows, most of the foreigners who succeeded in wresting the throne and ruling the country for any considerable length of time, have had some indigenous support or had been backed by a foreign power. Unfortunately the chroniclers do not reveal much about this aspect of Elara's rule. Here is yet another instance of what Wilhelm Geiger observed when he stated that "not what is said but what is left unsaid is the besetting difficulty of Sinhalese history."[12]

However, reading between the lines in the *Mahavamsa* account, one gets the impression that both Elara and Dutthagamani were participants in a feudal power game and not in a racial war fought between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The *Mahavamsa* states that when Elara was on his way to the Cetiya Mountain in a chariot to invite the

*bhikkhus* the nub of the yoke of his chariot strucka a dagoba, thereby causing damage to the monument. On this occasion it is said that Elara's ministers told him "Oh king ! our *thupa* has been damaged by you."[13] This clearly indicates that the ministers of Elara considered the *thupa* to be theirs, which means that at least the ministers who accompanied Elara in this mission were Buddhists, perhaps also Sinhalese. We also find that one of the generals of Elara was Mitta[14] who was a Sinhalese. His sister's son[15] was Nandimitta, one of Dutthagamani's ten commanders, to whom superhuman exploits hav been ascribed in the *Mahavamsa*.

Dutthagamani's march northwards in his campaign against Elara was along the right bank of the Mahavali river. In the process Dutthagamani had defeated Elara's generals known as Chatta, Titthamba, Mahakottha, Gavara, Issariya, Nalika, Dighabhaya, Kapisisa, Kota, Halavabhanaka, Vahittha, Gamani, Kumbha, Nandika, Khanu, Tamba, Unna and Jambu.[16] The *Mahavamsa* states that all these were Tamils but evidence for verification is limited. In the above list at least two names, Gamani and Dighabhaya, seem to be essentially Sinhala-Buddhist names. Dighabhaya was the step – brother of Dutthagamani who had been sent to Kaccakatittha along the river Mahavali by Kakavanna Tissa to guard the frontier buffer zone between Rajarata and southern Sri Lanka.[17] It seems he subsquently went over to Elara's camp. For this reason even he is called a *damila*, surely in a derogatory sense, by the chroniclers.[18] On the other hand, the name of one of the ten paladins of Dutthagamani, i. e. Velu, sounds like a Tamil name. However, a detailed etymological study of the names and a further examination of historical situations are necessary before arriving at a conclusion. In this connection it is relevant and significant to mention that at one stage in the battle, the Sinhalese are said to have killed their compatriots because they had not been able to identify their foe[19] Such a situation could have occured only if there had been a substantial number of Sinhalese in Elara's army. The name Bhalluka, which is given to the general who is said to have



arrived from South India after Elara's death to fight Dutthagamani, bespeaks a non – Tamil origin. The Dravidian or Tamil equivalent of Bhalluka would have been Phalluka. The Buddhist *suttas* mention a *thera* named Bhalluka and it is also interesting to note that two merchants Trapussa and Vallika (Tapassu and Bhalluka) are considered as the founders of the Girihandu Dagoba, a later Mahayana shrine in Sri Lanka.[20]

Both the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* refer to the killing of thirty – two kings by the son of Kakavanna Tissa.[21] The two references differ only in detail and the latter states that these thirty – two kings were Tamils. On the basis of this evidence it seems reasonable to assume that there were several semi – independent chiefs in the area north of Rohana when Elara was the foremost ruler in Rajarata and Dutthagamani in Rohana; perhaps Dutthagamani before striking the final blow at Elara's capital, subjugated these semi – independent chiefs in his attempt to unify the island.

In the final battle, Elara fell, pierced by his rival's dart, and subsequently Dutthagamani united Sri Lanka under one royal umbrella. He had funeral rites performed for his defeated enemy. Marking the site of his cremation for posterity he decreed that no one, not even the princes of the land, should pass by the monument without doing honour to the dead king. The *Mahavamsa* noted that "even to this day princes of Lanka, when they draw near to this place, are wont to silence their music because of this honour."[22] But time has dealt harshly with Elara' s monument. It has disappeared and perhaps the back garden of a government medical officer's residence now contains all that is left of it.

The *Mahavamsa* account states that Dutthagamani's campaign against Elara assumed the character of a holy war the sole objective of which was the perpetuation and glorification of Buddhism. It further states that a band of five hundred *bhikkhus* from Tissamaharama monastery accompanied the army and that Viharadevi accompanied her son and shared the perils and hardships of the campaign together with

the ordinary soldiers.[23] If the *Mahavamsa* statement represents a historical event, by allowing five hundred ascetics to accompny Dutthagamani to war, the brotherhood responded in blatant contradiction to Buddha's ruling forbidding monks to witness army parades and reviews. Not merely do they witness here, but actually participate in the very activity of war.[24] On the other hand, the *bhikkhu* participation in war may have been an innovation by the *Mahavamsa* author or the creators of the Mahavihara historical tradition once the political alliance between the Mahavihara fraternity and the king was forged. One of the guiding principles of the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka was the exemplification of the means by which *dhammadipa*, or the sanctuary of true religion (Theravada Buddhism) is to be maintained and edified. Accordingly, the chroniclers were far less concerned with the historicity of an event than with its significance. In their eyes, Duttha gamani's war was for the protection and promotion of the *dhamma*, to vindicate the Mahavihara and to purify the *dhammadipa* As Bardwell Smith has emphasised, in the Sinhala Buddhist chronicles, "bare fact was always less important than what the fact signified."[25]

The whole Dutthagamani – Elara episode of the *Mahavamsa* signifies the fact that Dutthagamani, having unified the island, established Buddhism on a very secure material basis, through tremendous royal patronage, by building monasteries and shrines of great magnitude in the Mahavihara complex. The *Mahavamsa* author, who belonged to the Mahavihara fraternity, glorified the heroic and 'ideal' aspect of Dutthagamani and was far less concerned with the historicity of certain events and situations than with their significance. In a historical sense no evidence is found in the *Mahavamsa* to suggest that Buddhists were persecuted under Elara. On the contrary, the chronicle itself states that Elara was a pious and just king and that, though himself a non – Buddhist, he had patronized Buddhism. Elara' s invitation to the *bhikkhus* of the Cetiya mountain, referred to in the *Mahavamsa*, may have been for an alms – giving, for some form of religious function, or to seek advice or to solicit support. Unfortunately the purpose of this invitation is not given in the



chronicle. But Elara' s love of justice, even in the eyes of the chronicler, was stronger than the natural affection for his own son[26] Ironically, Dathasena, one of the warriors of Dutthagamani Abhaya, later entered the Buddhist Order after crossing over to South India, the homeland of the Tamils and found peace in the monasteries there[27]

According to the *Mahavamsa*, Dutthagamani having unified Sri Lanka for the greater glory of Buddhism, lamented that he had been compelled to kill a countless number of human beings[28] in order to achieve this great purpose. Here the *Mahavamsa* author has been faced with a dilemma and, in his predicament he has improvised a convenient solution. It is said in the *Mahavamsa* that when the *arhats* [29] in Piyangudipa knew the king's thoughts they sent eight *arhats* to comfort him. And they, coming in the middle watch of the night. alighted at the palace gate.[30] These arhats are said to have assuaged the king's feelings and categorically asserted that all the killings of human beings caused by Dutthagamani in no way hindered his path to heaven. [31] Their argument was that, among the enemies of Dutthagamani who lost their lives in his war against Elara, there was only one person who had taken the Three Refuges and one who had observed the Five Precepts in addition. The rest were "unbelievers and men of evil life. . . not more to be esteemed than beasts."[31]

Killing a human being on the grounds of his beastly character connot be justified in terms of classical Buddhism. But the chronicles are not texts of classical *dhamma* and to expect classical Buddhism or the realization of it in them confounds doctrinal and historiographical aspects. Historiographically, the legitimization of Dutthagamani's actions by the *arhats* rests on two points: those destroyed by the king were non-Buddhists and their destruction was caused for the glorification of the *dhamma*. As Regina T Clifford has shown, the first point indicates a powerful Sinhala-Buddhist sentiment in emergence. Lanka must be free of all culturally heterodox, i. e. impure elements, before the *dhamma* can flourish. The second point reflects the justification of the warrior aspect because the

conquests and acts of violence are committed for the sake of the glory of the *sasana* and therefore incur no evil. The full-blown institutionalization of the *sangha* is also reflected in this stance; in keeping with the concept of *dhammadipa*, the brotherhood provides the power of the king with legitimate authority.[33]

It is notable that the author of the thirteenth century *Thupavamsa*, who drew most of his material from various earlier sources with the bulk of Dutthagamani-saga from the *Mahavamsa* account, chose to edit out the content of the message of solace given to Dutthagamani by the *arhats*. According to the *Thupavamsa*, the *arhats* assuaged the king's sorrow by stating that he need not lament because he had acquired sufficient merit through a countless number of previous births for him to be reborn for the last time as the right-hand disciple of the future Maithreya Buddha.[34]

In order to glorify the achievements of Dutthagamani, as befitting an epic, the author of the *Mahavamsa* not only introduced religious and racial tones to it but has also portrayed Gamani's father Kakavanna Tissa and brother Tissa as weak and cowardly characters. According to the chronicler, Gamani at the age of sixteen made known his intention of waging war against Tamils, but was thrice prevented by Kakavanna Tissa. Gamani, by his insulting retort, by sending women's ornaments to his father and by his self - imposed exile in the central mountain region (Malaya)[35] earns the epithest '*duttha*' (the enraged one).[36] The story may be a creation of a later age, perhaps by the author of the *Mahavamsa* himself, but it signifies the fact that the relations between Kakavanna Tissa and Dutthagamani were strained when the latter was still a youth. Kakavanna Tissa was neither weak nor cowardly. In fact it was he, able ruler that he was, who welded the various fiefs of Rohana into one unit. He brought the Kalani kingdom under his influence by giving his sister Somadevi in marriage to Prince Abhaya who was the ruler in that area.[37] Kakavanna Tissa also very tactfully made the minor king of Seru and Soma accept his suzerainty in Rohana. As Paranavitana has pointed out, it was Kakavanna Tissa who raised an army from among the able-bodied men of Rohana and had it trained. He established



workshops for the manufacture of the weapons with which he equipped his soldiers. He had garrisons posted at strategic points along the Mahavali river. He sent his younger son Tissa to Dighavapi and a son, named Dighabhaya (who subsequently went over to Elara's camp) from a consort other than Viharadevi, was entrusted with the task of guarding the frontier against possible inroads from the ruler of Rajarata. But unfortunately Kakavanna Tissa, like many other fathers with famous sons, suffered by comparison.[38] Perhaps this was felt by some of the monks in mediaeval times and that may explain the importance and detailed treatment given to Kakavanna Tissa and his religious activities by *bhikkhu* Kakusanda, the author of the thirteenth century *Dhatuvamsa*.

Tissa, the younger brother of Gamani, though depicted as an insignificant prince by the author of the *Mahavamsa*, defeated Gamani in their first encounter which took place at Yudaganava near Buttala, immediately after the death of Kakavanna Tissa, The warriors of the dead king did not participate in this battle, and this gives rise to the belief that though the elder Gamani was the legitimate heir to the throne, Tissa was also acceptable, perhaps on account of Gamani's rash behaviour. Dutthagamani had to flee accompanied only by one faithful follower. But in the second encounter Gamani was victorious after heavy fighting. Here the chronicler ridicules Tissa when he states that after the defeat, the latter sought refuge in the cell of the chief monk of a Vihara, hid under the bed and was later carried out of the Vihara in the guise of a dead monk.[39] According to the *Mahavamsa*, the Buddhist sangha subsequently intervened and brought about a reconciliation, and Tissa submitted to Dutthagamani who was now free to wage war against Elara.

The attitude adopted towards the Dutthagamani-Elara episode by Mayurapada thera, the author of the thirteenth century work *Pujavali*, has been discussed by Liyanagamage in an excellent essay entitled "A Forgotten Aspect of Sinhala-Tamil Relations".[40] Mayurapada thera was a contemporary of the Indian invader Magha (1215-1255). Writing with the memory of Magha's misdeeds fresh in his mind, the author has ascribed similar characteristics to earlier invasions and speaks of

them too in an angry and embittered tone. The good words said of Elara are not only absent in Mayurapada's *Pujavali* but he is branded as an unrighteous ruler who destroyed monasteries and the Buddhist Order.[41] *The Pujavali* states further that Dutthagamani, having been consecrated after killing one million thirty four thousand Tamils, ruled in accordance with the ten kingly qualities (*dasarajadharma*[42]). This text refers to *Magha's* reign as *demala arajitaya*[43] (period of Tamil dominance without a king) conveying the sentiment that Magha was not a legitimate ruler. Equally, by Sinhala Buddhist historiographical standards, Elara was not fit to be the king of Sri Lanka; that he must be removed from office was an irrefutable imperative. *The Pujavali* states "This island of Lanka belongs to the Buddha himself; it is like a treasury filled with the Three Gems. Therefore, the residence of wrong-believers in this island will never be permanent; just as the residence of the *Yaksas* of ancient past was not permanent. Even if a non-Buddhist ruled Sri Lanka by force for a while, the special influence of the Buddha saw to it that his line would never be established. As Lanka is suitable only for Buddhist kings their lines only will be established."[44]

Whatever the ideal position the Buddhist historiographers adopted, many outstanding and pious kings like Amandagamani Abhaya (19-29 A.D.) Voharika Tissa (209-231) Siri Sanghabodhi (247-249) Dhatusena (455-473) and Kittisirimegha (551-569) were killed owing to conspiracies and manoeuvrings for political power among the Buddhist princes and chiefs. In dynastic wars, kings such as Dathopatissa I (639-650) and his rival Kassapa even plundered treasures from monasteries and dagobas to carry on their campaigns.[45] One king warring against another, the decline of the power of one ruler and the emergenec of that of another and feuds between clans are nothing new in ancient history. Furthermore, between the rival Buddhist sects of the Mahayanists of the Abhayagirivihara and the ultimately victorious Hinayanists of the Mahavihara, a bitter struggle was waged involving kings and counsellors and adding another complication to a period of strife. In the circumstances the fact that the ruler of Rajarata during Dutthagamani's early phase happened to be a Tamil should not lead one to interpret the Dutthagamani-Elara episode as one of serious rivalry and



conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. From the semi-mythical Vijaya down to Sri Vikrama Rajasingha, the last Kandyan king, the legitimate kings of the island at various periods established feudal matrimonial ties with Tamil families of South India. Candamukhasiva (43-52 A.D.) and Mahanama (406-428) had Tamil consorts and Queen Anula (B.C. 48-44), who was notorious for changing husbands, married Tamil chiefs twice.[46] There have been Sinhala chiefs who had supported Tamil rulers[47] and Tamils who had supported Sinhala kings.[48] Kings like Aggabodhi IV (667-683) satisfied the Tamils in the island by appointing some of them to high office in the state. A few of them, such as Potthakuttha, Potthasata, and Mahakanda appear as benefactors of the Sangha. Aggabodhi IV (unlike Dutthagamani) was not a king who was idealized or glorified by the chroniclers; even so they record the fact that he was held in such high esteem by his subjects that when he died they all mourned for him even preserving the ashes of his pyre in the belief that the remains from the cremation of such a good man had curative properties. Potthakuttha, appointed to high office by Aggabodhi, became a king maker after the death of his benefactor.[49] Besides, in feudal rivalries among Sinhala princes, some of them such as Ilanaga (33-43), Abhayanaga (231-240), Jetthatissa II (328-337), Aggabodhi III (628), Dathopatissa II (659-667) and Manavamma (684-718) sought the assistance of South Indian allies to secure the throne.[50]

Thus, the balance of forces on the Indian mainland often influenced the turn of events in Sri Lanka. In fact in ancient politics, feudal chieftains, royal princes and religious organizations, which were also part of the feudal structure, played a more important role than ethnic groups. It is interesting to note here that Dutthagamani's warrior, Dathasena, who went to South India and entered the Buddhist Order, did so because Dutthagamani had (it is said) given an order to kill him. According to the story, some favourite warriors of Dutthagamani had poisoned the mind of the king against Dathasena, saying that the latter posed a threat to his royal authority.[51] Yet what receives most emphasis in the Sinhala Buddhist records regarding non-Sinhala, non-Buddhist chieftains and princes, are the accounts

of the harm caused by them, more particularly to Buddhism and Buddhist institutions. The chroniclers have painted a general picture of Tamils as the inveterate enemies of the Sinhala people and their religion.

The treatment of the Dutthagamani-Elara episode in the three important texts, the *Dipavamsa*, the *Mahawamsa*, and the *Pujavali* differs from one another and throws light not only on the development of historiography in Sri Lanka, but also on prejudices that have entered into historical records. The views of the authors of these texts which have had a wide influence on the shaping of contemporary attitudes (both Sinhala and Tamil) have to be re-examined in the context of the circumstances under which each work was written. Special cognizance has to be taken of the purpose of the author, and of the climate of thought prevailing at the time of writing.

## II

These three chronicles, particularly the *Mahavamsa* and the *Pujavali* have had a profound influence as source-books for the reconstruction of the history of the island. Historians such as Codrington, Mendis and Paranavitana[52] have treated these sources with a certain amount of caution before extracting historical facts from them. But none of them have viewed the Dutthagamani-Elara saga outside the racial or ethnic framework in which it was set by the chroniclers. The only admirable exception to the traditional approach is found in The *Story of Ceylon* written by Ludowyk.[53] Ludowyk states that his work is a narration of events, but in his narration he has made an exemplary attempt to examine the 'Vijayan myth' and the Dutthagamani saga with critical acumen, and he has also made a brief study of the social formation in early Sri Lanka.

The religious background used to glorify Dutthagamani has been examined in brief, by several scholars, including Paranavitana and, in detail, by Alice Greenwald, Regina Clifford and R.A.L.H. Gunawardena.[54] Of these, Alice Greenwald has gone to extremes in overemphasising contradictions between the ideals of canonical Buddhism and the practical politics of a king at



war. Nevertheless these studies have greatly contributed to a better understanding of the nature of the historiography of Sri Lanka.

Most of the history text-books used in schools until recently, related the Dutthagamani saga in accordance with the *Mahavamsa-Pujavali* tradition. *Ceylon and World History* by David Hussey; *Vimarshana Sahita Lanka Itihasaya* by Handupelpola Punnaratana; *Ceylon and Indian History* by Ratnasabapathi and Horace Perera; *Lanka Itihasaya* by N. K. Sirisena, *Purana Lankava* by Ranawaka and Lokuliyana; *Alut Itihasa Kiyaweem Pota* and *Lanka Ha Loka Itihasaya* by S. F. De Silva; *Lankava Ha Lokaya* by Somaratna Wijesinghe, and several versions of *Lankava Ha Tadasanna Rajyayo* prescribed for the G. C. E. Ordinary level examination could be cited as examples of texts falling into this category.[55] Some of these texts have even accepted in toto the legend concerning Dutthagamani's birth found in the *Mahavamsa*, while others, in their treatment of the subject, have depicted the Tamils as the ancient enemies of the Sinhalese.

Outside scholarly historical works and writings of a text-book nature, some quasi-historical or semi religio-political writings have contributed considerably to the propagation of the *Mahavamsa* version of the Dutthagamani story. Of these, the book titled *The Revolt in the Temple*, and the writings of Anagarika Dharmapala stand out. *The Revolt in the Temple* was written to commemorate 2500 years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and the author closely follows the *Mahavamsa* tradition in interpreting history. In the prologue he states, "The history of Lanka is the history of the Sinhalese race. Neither of the two stories has any extent or significance apart from the other." According to him, "Dutugemunu found his people helpless and dejected with little or no courage and, as was thought, with no future. In a few years he left the country full of fire and full of spirit. He projected his own personality into the brain and arm of every Sinhalese from Ruhuna to Rajarata. He fired the country with a new spirit and made the Sinhalese once more conscious of themselves and their destiny." The author goes back to his feudalistic, religio-cultural roots when he states "If Gemunu had no other claim to fame in this Island, he would

have it in the memorable answer he gave to his mother, to the question why he "lay curled up in bed". That simple answer has been our problem from the dawn of our civilization to the present day."[56]

Anagarika Dharmapala, the well-known social and religious reformer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cited the exploits of Dutthagamani to instil Sinhala sentiments among his followers, as befitting his slogan "Sinhalese! Awake". In a message to the young men of Sri Lanka he stated "we have to ransack the literature of the science of patriotism to learn to act as patriots should for the preservation of our nation, our literature, our land and our most glorious religion at whose source our fore-fathers drank deep for nearly seventy generations, which had preserved their vitality to fight against foes since the time of our heroic and patriot king, the righteous Dutthagamani, who with the help of his mother and his patriotic followers, and blessed by the association of the Bhikkhu sangha reinvigorated and revitalized the nation..." In the same message to the young people he has admonished them thus: "Enter into the realm of our King Dutugemunu in spirit and try to identify yourself with the thoughts of that great King who rescued Buddhism and our nationalism from oblivion."[57]

The Sinhala-chauvinist aspects of the Dutthagamani saga as portrayed in the *Mahavamsa* have been given prominence not only in history texts and quasi-historical and religio-political writings, but also in the language texts used in schools in the recent past. *The Siksha Margaya* series written by Munidasa Cumaratunga, *Kiyaweem Rasaya* series by J. Francis Fernando, *Siyabasmaga* series by K.I. Karunaratna, *Mavbasa* or the Sinhala Mother Tongue series by A. D. Kaluaracchi, *Gemunu* reader series by T.S. Dharmabandu and *Situmina* series by H.M. Somaratna[58] are a few notable language texts which could be mentioned in this connection. In the language exercises in some of these texts the Sinhala child's mind was biased against Tamils through questions such as "Who was Elara? What were the hardships faced by the Sinhalese during his reign?"[59]

Similarly *Kavmina*, an anthology of poems by S. Mahinda approved as a text for standards VI, VII, VIII contain several



poems based on the Dutthagamani saga which kindle 'Sinhala nationalist' feelings.[60] Even in some of the text-books used to teach Buddhism as a subject, Sinhala chauvinistic sentiments have been aroused by simplyfying the Dutthagamani episode of the *Mahavamsa*. A notable example of this is found in a Grade III Buddhism text titled *Pathasaliya Buddhacaritaya*.[61] However, it must be stated that with the introduction of the educational reforms of 1972, greater attention has been paid to curriculum planning and the Government has taken over the responsibility for text-book writing. As a result, some improvement in the treatment of such sensitive topics as the Dutthagamani saga could be seen in the school texts. But there is a need for deep and balanced thinking in that direction, in the interest of the nation as a whole.

The Dutthagamani-Elara episode has been recreated by creative artists too, by faithfully adhering to the *Mahavamsa-Pujavali* tradition. The Tower Hall playwrights Charles Dias, Stepen Lal Pathirana and L.D.A. Ratnayaka have dramatized it;[62] while Rapiel Tennekone and S. Mahinda have recreated it in Sinhala verse.[63] Henpitagedara Gnanasiha has elaborated on the *Mahavamsa* story in his Pali poetical work *Gamani Gita* which was honoured with a literary award by the Government in 1968.[64] Besides, the anti-Tamil exploits of Dutthagamani, as glorified in the *Mahavamsa*, have been quoted at length by Piyadasa Sirisena[65] to stimulate the religio-cultural sentiments of the Sinhalese.

Thus, it is clear that the *Mahavamsa-Pujavali* account of the Dutthagamani-Elara episode has helped considerably to bring about 'Sinhala consciousness'. Similarly, myths and prejudices prevalent among Tamils have contributed towards 'Tamil consciousness' among the Tamils of Sri Lanka.[66] A scientific understanding of the early history of both Sinhala and Tamil communities and the separation of myth from history would undoubtedly help in the study of history as a social process and initiate a closer dialogue between the society of today and that of yesterday.

## NOTES

1. E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, London 1961, p. 24.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 17
3. *University of Ceylon: History of Ceylon*, Editor in Chief H. C. Ray, Vol. I, Pt. I, 1959, p. 48.
4. *DV*. XVIII, 47-54.
5. *DV*. I, 1; IX, 1.
6. *U.H.C.* Vol. I, Pt. I, p. 49.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 292-293.
8. See e.g. *MV* XXXVII, 10-14.
9. *MV*, XXII, 33-40.
10. *MV*, XXII, 78-86.
11. *MV*, XXI, 13.
12. Wilhelm Geiger, *Culavamsa*, Eng. Tr. Pt. I, London 1929, P.V.
13. "*Deva thupo no taya bhinno*", *MV*, XXIII, 24; "*Deviyani apage saya teme oba visin bindina laday kivuha*", *Mahavamsa*, Sinh. Tr. Batuvantudawe Devarakshita, Colombo, B. E. 2485, pp. 23-24; Geiger's English translation of the original Pali stanza is inaccurate.
14. *MV*, XXIII, 4.
15. *MV*, XXIII, 4-15.
16. *MV*, XXV, 7-15.
17. *MV*, XXIII, 16-17.
18. The word '*damila*' is frequently used in the chronicles of Sri Lanka as a general term for inhabitants of the Peninsular Indian Kingdoms South of the Vindhya-Sathpura range.
19. *MV*, XXV, 16-17.
20. *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, IV, pp. 153 ff; also see: A. D. T. E. Perera, "The Lineage of Elara, King of Anuradhapura and his Possible Relationship With the Aryan Predecessors of the Ruling House of Ceylon", *Vidyodaya Journal of Arts, Science and Letters*, Vol. III, no. 2, July 1970, p. 128.
21. *DV*, XVIII, 53-54; *MV*, XXV, 75
22. *MV*, XXV, 73-74.



23. *MV*, XXV, 1-4; 55-56.
24. Bardwell L. Smith (Ed.) *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, Chambersburg, 1978, p. 18.
25. Bardwell L. Smith (Ed.) *The Two Wheels of Dhamma*, Chambersburg, 1972, p. 32.
26. *MV*, XXI, 13-33.
27. *Saddharmalankaraya*, (Ed.) Kirielle Gnanawimala, Colombo, 1954, pp. 544-555.
28. *MV*, XXV, 103-104.
29. *arhat* is a being no longer subject to rebirth; 'worthy one' in a literal sense.
30. *MV*, XXV, 105-106.
31. *Sagga* in Pali and *svarga* in Sinhala. The concept of heaven is found both in popular and canonical Buddhism. But heaven in Buddhism is not a permanent abode or the ultimate goal as in Christianity.
32. *MV*, XXV, 110-111.
33. Regina T. Clifford, "The Dhammadipa Tradition of Sri Lanka: Three Models within the Sinhalese Chronicles" in Bardwell L. Smith (Ed.) *Religion and Legitimation of Power*, p. 43.
34. *Thupavamsa*, (Ed.) Denipitiye Jinaratana, Colombo, 1937, p. 697.
35. The *Rajavaliya* written in the eighteenth century specifically mentions Kotmale as the place of exile of Dutthagamani. (see *Rajavaliya*, Ed. Watuwatte Pemananda, Colombo, 1959, p. 37) The myths and legends woven around his stay at Kotmale are analysed in Marguerite S. Robinson, "The House of the Mighty Hero' or the 'House of Enough Paddy'? Some Implications of a Sinhalese Myth", *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, (Ed.) E. R. Leach, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 122-152.
36. *MV*, XXIV, 1-7.
37. *Dhatuvamsa*, (Ed.) Munidasa Cumaranatunga, Colombo, B. E. 2483, p. 30.

38. *U.H.C.I*, Pt. I, pp. 150-151.

39. *MV*, XXIV, 37-40.

40. A. Liyanagamage, "A Forgotten Aspect of the Relations Between the Sinhalese and the Tamils; *The Upasakajanalankara*: A re-examination of its date and authorship and its significance in the History of South India and Ceylon" *Ceylon Historical Journal*, XXV, nos. 1-4; October 1978, p. 141.

41. *Pujavali* (Ed.) Denipitiye Jinaratana, Colombo, 1937, p. 697.

42. *Ibid*,

43. *Ibid.*, p. 709.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 676.

45. *C.V*, XLIV, 131-142.

46. *MV*, XXXIV, 15-27.

47. *CV*, XXXVIII, 38-39.

48. *Pujavali*, *op. cit.*, p. 711.

49. *CV*, XLVI, 1-147.

50. *MV*, XXXV, 27; XXXVI, 42-50; *CV* XXXIX 20-21; XLIV, 72-73.

51. *Saddharmalankaraya*, *op. cit.*, pp. 544-5555.

52. see E.g. H. W. Codrington, *A Short History of Ceylon*, Revised Edition, London 1947; G. C. Mendis, *Problems of Ceylon History*, Colombo, 1966; S. Paranavitana and C. W. Nicholas, *A Concise History of Ceylon*, Colombo, 1961.

53. E. F. C. Ludowyk, *The Story of Ceylon*, London, 1967, pp. 31-36.

54. All in Bardwell L Smith (Ed.) *Religion and Legitimation of Power*.

55. David Hussey, *Ceylon and World History*, Book I, Colombo, 1934; Handupelpola Punnaratana, *Vimarsana Sahita Lanka Itihasaya*, Colombo, 1964; L. H. Horace Perera and M. Ratnasabapathi, *Ceylon and Indian History*, Colombo, 1964; N. K. Sirisena, *Lanka Itihasaya*, Colombo, 1963; Ranawaka



and Lokuliyana, *Purana Lankava*, Colombo, 1959; S. F. De Silva, *Alut Itihasa Kiyaweem Pota*, Grade III, 1955; S.F.De Silva, *Lanka Ha Loka Itihasaya*, Grade VI, Colombo, 1968; Somaratna Wijesingha, *Lankava Ha Lokaya*, Grade VI, Colombo 1968; Newton Pintu Moragoda, *Lankava Ha Loka Itihasaya*, Colombo, 1967; Diviyagaha yasassi, *Lankava Ha Asanna Rajyayo*, Colombo 1966; Newton Pintu Moragoda, *Lankava Ha Tadasanna Rajyayo*, Colombo 1966.

56. [D. C. Wijewardene], *Dharmavijaya* (*Triumph of Righteousness*) *or The Revolt in the Temple*, Sinha Publications, Popular Edition, Colombo, 1953, p. 25; p. 58.

57. Anagarika Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness*, *A Collection of Speeches*, *Essays and Letters of Anagarika Dharmapala*, Ananda Guruge (Ed.), Colombo, 1965, p. 501-510.

58. e. g. see: *Siksha Margaya*, Reader II and III; *Kiyaweem Rajaya*, Step III; *Siyabasmaga*, second and fourth standard Readers; *Mavbasa* for Grade VI. *Gemunu* Reader Series III, IV, V; *Situmina* Reader IV.

59. *Siksha Margaya*, Second Standard Reader, 1951, p. 58.

60. S. Mahinda, *Kavmina*, Colombo, undated.

61. Veragoda Amaramoli, *Pathasaliya Buddha Caritaya*, Grade III, Colombo, undated; Lessons 19 and 20.

62. L.D.A. Ratnayake, *The History of The Tower Hall Dramas*, Colombo, 1972, p. 150; p. 166; p. 228; p. 279.

63. Rapiel Tennekone, *Sinhala Vamsaya*, Maharagama, 1956, S. Mahinda, *Lanka Mata*: *Jatika Kavyaya*, Colombo, 1962; *Ratnamali Kavyaya*, Colombo, 1965.

64. Henpitagedara Gnanasiha, *Gamani Gita*, Colombo, 1968.

65. Piyadasa Sirisena, *Mahesvari* 3rd edition, 1959, p. 10, p. 18, p. 99; *Jayatissa Saha Rosalin*, 1961 edition, pp. 169-172; *Ishta Deviya*, 3rd edition, 1957, p. 51, pp. 114-115; *Dingirimanika*, 7th edition, 1961, p. 6; *Asthaloka Dharma Cakraya*, fifth edition, 1963, p. 247.

66. e. g. see: C. Rasanayagam, *Ancient Jaffna*: *Being a Research into the History of Jaffna*, Madras, 1926; C. Sivaratnam, *The Tamils in Early Ceylon*, Colombo, 1968.

# Some Aspects of Class & Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

Kumari Jayawardena

Under British rule, Sri Lanka was referred to as the 'model Crown Colony', prospering under plantation capitalism and other 'benefits' of foreign rule, where *pax Britannica* prevailed and where rebellion, sedition and violent disturbance hardly occurred. Reality was somewhat different, however. Armed popular resistance was continuous from 1815 (when the British finally conquered the whole island) until 1848: a protracted war of independence was fought in 1817–18, and a serious peasant rebellion occurred in 1848. Working-class agitation was common from the 1890s on wards: important strikes were organized by the printers (1893), the carters (1906), railway workers (1912), while the first general strike took place in 1923. In addition to these confrontations, there was tension and violence between the major ethnic and religious groupings. With the revival of Buddhism in the late 19th century, conflict arose between the Buddhists (who felt themselves to be politically and economically deprived) and the Christians and Muslims. This was sometimes expressed in violence (e. g. the Catholic-Buddhist riots in Colombo in 1883: the outbreaks in Anuradhapura in 1903, directed against churches, taverns and butchers shops, and the Sinhalese-Muslim riots of 1915). The main arena of conflict, however, has been between the Sinhalese and Tamils, major conflagrations erupting in 1958, 1977, and August 1981. Again, in August 1982, serious rioting broke out between Sinhalese and Muslims in Galle.

This article will re-examine some aspects of the structure of the economy in colonial Sri Lanka, the nature of the nationalist and revivalist agitation of the period, and the class character of these movements, in order to stimulate



an understanding of the present contradictions between the Sinhalese and the minority groups. The historical period under consideration is that of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when local merchant capitalism developed, resulting in new class formations and the first expressions of nationalism through religious and cultural revival. It was during this period that communalism took on its modern form. We shall not go into the details of the ensuing conflicts, but will discuss those aspects that provide some background to the analysis of the continuing presence of communalism in Sri Lanka.

Positive aspects of the incipient nationalism associated with the Buddhist revival and temperance movements at the turn of the century in Sri Lanka have received the attention of historians and are now an accepted part of our recent history. Due credit has been given to the patriotism of national leaders who aroused the people to a new awareness of national identity, giving leadership not only to semi-political movements of protest against various aspects of foreign rule, but also providing assistance to early working-class struggles. But the nationalism of the period remained incipient; it failed to develop into a fully matured national movement against foreign rule and even gave rise to chauvinism and communalism. This article therefore specifically discusses.

(a) the rise of Sinhala merchant capital in the 19th century and its weakness in relation both to non-Sinhala capital associated with the minority communities and foreign merchant capital,

(b) The assertion of a Sinhala Buddhist identity by the Sinhala merchants and petty bourgeoisie through the religious-cultural revival,

(c) the communalism inherent in this revivalist ideology.

An analysis of the formation of classes in Sri Lanka under the impact of the establishment of a plantation economy in the mid-19th century is a necessary prelude to this discussion. In the absence, however, of such studies,

this article will first set out a broad and necessarily tentative description of the class structure at the beginning of this century, sufficient for an analysis of communal tensions in this period.

The mercantilist and monopolistic practices, first of the Dutch and later of the British up to 1830, had restricted the trading and others opportunities of accumulation open to local entrepreneurs. In this period, the colonial economy offered only modest profits to this class as contractors, traders, paddy tax collectors, shippers and arrack renters. However after 1830, the growth of the economy based on the plantation sector created conditions for a class of merchant capitalists who made quick fortunes from the arrack sold to plantation and urban workers. Under conditions of strict protection and control by the state, monopoly rights to sell liquor were auctioned by government. In these circumstances, combinations and cartels developed among renters, enabling them to control most stages of the arrack industry, especially distillation and the wholesale and retail trade in liquor. This laid the basis for the first spurt of capital accumulation by an emerging local bourgeoisie. The big arrack renters invested their profits in coffee, graphite, coconut, rubber and urban property. Through education of the next generation in English and in some instances abroad, there emerged a stratum of 'professionals' engaged in law, medicine and in government service. Thus they gained in status and added social respectability to the wealth that they had amassed. The new class of merchants and plantation owners were able to challenge the old traditional land-owning class, financially, socially and professionally.[1] The limited investment opportunities of the colonial economy however stunted their growth and left them ideologically backward.

The main class groups in late 19th century Sri Lanka can be broadly categorised as follows:

(i) **The bourgeoisie** - which included

(a) The Sinhala and Tamil land and plantation owners, belonging mainly to the *goyigama* and *vellala* castes, who had been rewarded with grants of land for their services as Mud-



liyars (officials) both to the Dutch and the British administrations, Despite the mercantile opportunities of this time, they did not invest their monies except in plantations; they were 'feudal' in their life styles and faithful to the British, many being converts to Christianity. There was also a stratum of aristocratic landlords in the Kandyan provinces, holding bureaucratic sinecures and controlling land cultivated by peasants.

(b) The new class of merchants, speculators, plantation owners and professionals of all communities and castes mainly from the non-agricultural coastal areas. They were innovative and enterprising and moved to remote areas of the country in search of quick profits - especially in the very lucrative liquor trade after 1830. But they were essentially a weak bourgeoisie investing the liquor profits in coffee, graphite and coconut production, being unable to venture into the export-import trade, and in the colonial context, having no opportunities for expanding into the sphere of industrial capital. They assimilated British social values and basically accepted the continuance of British rule while making demands for limited reforms. They were thus in no sense a 'national bourgeoisie' with contradictions with imperialism.

(ii) **A petty bourgeoisie** that contained two segments cutting across caste and communal barriers.

(a) Small land owners, artisans, craftsmen, small traders and petty producers, mainly rural based who had their origins in the pre-capitalist economy and were adjusting themselves to new economic trends. This group was educated in the indigenous languages, followed the local religions and were active in village level associations for moral and social 'upliftment'

(b) A new group of (mainly urban) clerks, minor bureaucrats, shopkeepers and teachers, spawned by the needs of the plantation economy and the expanding activities of the state and service sectors. The petty bourgeois intelligentsia

(especially in the urban sector) were articulate on economic and social questions and supported movements for social reform.

(iii) The working people composed of –

(a) Plantation workers of Indian origin whose employment relations were of a pre-capitalist nature and a small number of Sinhala, Tamil and Malayali wage workers in the public utilities (port, railways, and roads) and in numerous enterprises servicing the plantations in the city of Colombo, Though strikes and working-class protest had begun by 1893, the urban workers had not developed a strong class consciousness and were therefore under the ideological influence of the more articulate sections of the petty bourgeoisie.

(b) The peasantry and agricultural workers engaged in paddy cultivation and the growing of other crops. Many were small producers eking out a precarious existence in a stagnant agricultural economy, whether they worked on their own plots of land or as sharecroppers. There was also an expanding stratum of landless agricultural labour in the process of formation. These groups were also influenced strongly by the ideology of the rural petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, and supported movements of religious revival and social protest.

### Sinhala Merchant Capital and the Communal Minorities

The ideological content of the incipient political movement of the late 19th century should be considered in relation to the condition of merchant capitalism in Sri Lanka. This class failed to give leadership to a bourgeois nationalist liberation movement directed against British rule. Far from competing with the British, the interests of the local capitalists were essentially subsidiary and dovetailed into those of the British; they in fact benefitted from their links with British business firms and with the colonial bureaucracy. As James Pieris, a moderate reformist politician, whose father was a leading arrack renter, said in 1908, "British planters deserve the credit for having brought capital



into the country and shown us the path along which we may all win prosperity... The interests of the Ceylonese planters are identical with those of the European planters". (Ceylon National Review, February, 1908).

Differences however existed among the sections of the Sinhala bourgeoisie referred to earlier; the 'new rich' merchants wanted limited reforms, such as the franchise for the middle class, political representation and equality of opportunity. They were opposed by the Mudaliyar group of 'old rich' land and plantation owners who unquestioningly supported British rule and, like the British, were apprehensive of the effects of such reforms. This conservative section of the Sinhala bourgeoisie belonged predominantly to the *goyigama* caste; the reformist section included both *goyigama* and persons of several castes of which the *karava* caste was prominent. These groups often indulged in caste polemics which were merely the outward expression of the (somewhat classical) antagonism between landowners and a rising merchant class, which has led some historians to mistakenly analyse this period in terms of caste conflict and to misinterpret the rise of the new merchant sector of the bourgeoisie as the 'rise of the karava'. However this article is concerned with the ideological aspect of yet another contradiction that existed – namely that between Sinhala merchant capital and foreign and minority groups of traders. The discussion which follows will deal with the resentment and hostility of the Sinhala merchants and other Sinhala groups directed against non-Sinhala traders, comprising both Indian and those of the minority communities and the growth of a communal ideology among the Sinhala capitalists and petty bourgeoisie.

### Restraints on the expansion of Sinhala merchant capital and economic disabilities facing the Sinhalese

At several levels in the colonial economy, the Sinhalese were to feel at a disadvantage vis-a-vis other ethnic groups. First, the plantations, agency houses, banks and key areas of foreign trade were controlled by British interests; what is more, British imperialist policies had the effect of restricting the growth of local industry through a denial of bank-credit and by tariff structures that favoured British manufactures. Second, the export-

import sector and wholesale trade were dominated by merchant capitalists from India. These were 'merchant princes' with business connections abroad, in India, Africa and the Far East. They owned fleets of 'buggalows' that traded with India, the Maldives and nearby islands, and had access to ample financial resources and credit facilities. They thus acquired a virtual monopoly of an important component of Sri Lanka's external trade. They imported rice, sugar, flour, kerosene oil, and a variety of other products and exported local produce.

At the beginning of the 20th century, this trade was dominated by seven leading Borah firms organised on a family basis (Carimjee Jafferjee, A. H. S. Jeevunjee, A. T. Noorbhai, Heptulabhoy Abdullaly, E. G. Adamaly, A. E. S. Jeevunjee and H.M. Moosajee.) and by a few Memon traders (Janoo Hassan) and Parsee traders such as P. N. Kapadia, R. Pestonjee and J. Rustomjee. Most of them also owned plantations, lived in great splendour, gave liberally to British and local charities, and were politically loyal to the British. With access to finance, shipping and with regional trading connections, these Indian traders effectively controlled the relatively complex and lucrative lines of commerce in which British capital showed no interest. The entrenchment of the Indians caused the emerging Sri Lankan merchant capitalists to confine their business interests to plantations, graphite mining and the liquor trade. For example of the new rich inter-related *karava* families of arrack renters of the 19th century – the *de Soysa, de Mel, Peiris, Amarasuriya* and *Dias* family groups-diversified into graphite and plantation agriculture while the new rich interrelated *Senanayake Kotalawala* and *Attygalle* families (of the *goyigama* caste), having made their fortunes in graphite, subsequently invested in plantations & also in arrack renting in Colombo. The few Sinhala merchants like *N. S. Fernando, D. D. Pedris, H. Don Carolis* and *W. E. Bastian* themselves retailers and importers of foreign goods, were not able to emulate the successful Indian traders. Thus the class of Sinhala capitalists could not break through, in any significant way, into the wholesale, large scale retail or export-import trade of the country.

Third, in the area of retail trade, the smaller Sinhala traders were hard-pressed to compete with the trading communities such



as Muslims and Chettiars who had traditionally been in the business for some time; local minority groups also had a large stake in the petty retail trade and peddling all over the country, even to the smallest village — the itinerant Muslim hawker being a common feature of village life. The small Sinhala boutique keeper, trader or pedlar was thus constantly aware of the competition he had to face from counterparts of minority groups.

Fourth, in the area of wage-employment, one can mention the fears of the Sinhala white – collar workers and other skilled and unskilled wage workers who had to compete with workers of local ethnic minorities, especially with Tamils and South Indian migrants for the limited avenues of employment that existed in an undeveloped colonial economy. The largest section of the working-class (on plantations) was composed of migrant labour: competition for employment existed in the port, railway and urban factories where there was a high proportion of Indian migrant workers, both Tamil and Malayali.

Fifth, aggravating the disadvantages of competition in trade and employment, was the virtual monopoly of money lending held by members of minority ethnic groups: Sinhala merchants at all levels and the Sinhala white – collar workers and others were forced to go to them for credit. Even the prosperous Sinhala renters and planters of the 19th and early 20th centuries were not considered credit- worthy by the foreign banks that operated in Colombo, and being denied access to such institutionalised credit, were compelled to rely on the Chettiar money lenders who charged usurious rates of interest.[2] The urban petty bourgeoisie also had recourse for quick loans to the Pathan (popularly called "Afghan") money lenders who were a prominent feature of city life. Since the almost 'sinful' practice of usury was associated with minority groups, it is not surprising that the economic problems of the Sinhala traders and petty bourgeoisie became tied up with feelings of chauvinism and that emotional tirades against foreign money lenders were common among the Sinhalese.

In discussing such popular prejudices fostered at the time among the Sinhalese, it is also necessary to stress that in periods of economic difficulty, the hostility of the poorer

sections of the population could be more easily directed against traders of ethnic minority groups. This was clear in 1915, when the rise in prices and shortages caused by the World War led to an intensification of popular hatred against Muslim traders, erupting in serious rioting. At this time, Governor Chalmers, in trying to explain the animosity of the peasantry towards Muslim traders, stated that they had "always been viewed by the villager with feelings entertained at all times and in all lands towards transitory aliens who make money out of the local peasantry by supplying their wants at the 'shop' ", adding that in a peasant economy "where retail prices are expressed in cents and half cents, even a slight rise in prices is both felt and resented by the customer".[3]

The animosity of the Sinhalese towards the Tamil section of the population had a different origin. Historically, the conflict, when it had existed between Sinhalese and Tamils was *political* rather than racial - taking the form of rivalry between rulers of kingdoms. But in periods of cooperation the relations between the communities had been cordial, to the extent that not only were the last kings of Kandy of the Nayakkar dynasty from Madurai in South India, but the pretenders to the throne (in the post-1815 period) who led revolts against the British, had to pretend to be Tamil even when they were Sinhala in origin, in order to establish their legitimacy.

It was with the development of the colonial economy in the 19th century that tensions arose, between these groups which took a communal form. Like the Sinhalese, the Tamils were unable to make a significant break - through into the export import trade or the lucrative retail trade. In addition (unlike the Sinhala bourgeoisie), the Sri Lankan Tamils did not even have avenues of accumulation through graphite or liquor renting and only a few Tamils had large coconut or other plantations. In this situation, the Tamils were the main competitors with the Sinhalese for the few other avenues of advance - namely government employment at all levels and the professions; hence competition for advance through the educational system and for employment became aggravated among these two communities.



## II. Sinhala Merchant Capital and the Buddhist Revival.

As in many other countries, early resistance to foreign domination in Sri Lanka took on the form of a religious-cultural revival. For as Amilcar Cabral has pointed out.

> "The history of national liberation struggles shows that generally these struggles are preceded by an increase in expression of culture, consolidated progressively into an... attempt to affirm the cultural personality of the dominated people, as a means of negating the oppressor culture... it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation".[4]

However in Sri Lanka the "seed of opposition" which began through the affirmation of "the cultural personality of the dominated people'," did not blossom into nationalism or a full-scale liberation movement. It was confined to the realm of cultural and religious agitation by the majority group and later degenerated into communalism against the minorities. It is this phenomenon that one has to try and understand, in order to assess correctly the growth of latter day chauvinism.

In Sri Lanka, the resistance to foreign rule had begun in the early decades of the 19th century, even taking the form of armed revolts and uprisings. Buddhist monks had given leadership and participated in such revolts; in later times they were naturally in the forefront of the struggle to purify and revive Buddhism. There had developed, by the turn of the century, many contradictions between Christians and Buddhists. The British rulers were regarded as supporters of Christianity and of proselytization through missionary education, and in addition, most of the leading families of the 'old' and 'new' bourgeoisie had become Christian. But those Buddhists who had made their wealth in arrack renting, mining, coconut, cinnamon and rubber planting had an added grievance. Inspite of their wealth and newly-acquired status, as Buddhists, they were unrepresented in the higher echelons of government service and in the Legislative Council, where from 1833 until

1912 (with one exception) Protestant Christians of a single family group had been successively appointed to represent the interests of the low-country Sinhalese. The Buddhist bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie thus keenly felt that they were a disadvantaged and deprived section of the population– both politically and culturally.

The agitation of the Sinhala Buddhists therefore took place on both fronts. As far as the cultural aspect went, it took the form of an attempt to rescue Buddhism from the decay and degeneration it was seen to have suffered due to loss of state patronage and to the state-supported missionary activities; wealthy Buddhists attempted to replace the state with organised private support for temples. One important aspect of this attempt was an attack on the government for its neglect of Buddhist education and its support of Christian education and missionary activities; another target was the liquor policy of the state which was seen to result in a proliferation of taverns and a consequent increase of social problems. Such state policies were held to be responsible for the decline of traditional Sinhala Buddhist culture and values; the anglicised bourgeoisie was also attacked for its adoption of alien social values which were denounced as degenerate and false. Links with movements in the West – the rationalist and free thinker's organisations in Britain which openly challenged Christianity, and the Theosophical Society with its emphasis on the brotherhood of man and its partiality for the religions of the East – also provided an impetus to the revival. The arrival in Sri Lanka in 1880 of the founders of the Theosophical Society, Colonel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, and their activities in the island, gave a greater degree of dynamism to the Buddhist education and revival movements, which had been started earlier by bhikkhus Migetuwatte Gunananda and Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala. Colonel Olcott, who was an able organiser and propagandiser, set about mobilising the Buddhists and raising funds for the cause. The Buddhist movement received money and support from the new rich Buddhists such as *Thomas de Silva Amarasuriya*, the leading arrack renter of Galle; *Simon Perera Abeywardena*, a coffee and cinnamon planter of Galle, several Panadura arrack renters (including *P. Jeremias Dias*, *M. Cornelis Perera*,



*M. Mathes Salgado*, *Andiris Perera and P. Domingo Dias*) and from the leading Sinhala Buddhist traders and merchants *C.H. Don Carolis*, *N. S. Fernando*, *D. D. Pedris*, *W. E. Bastian*, *R. A. Mirando* and *Adris Mendis* among others). While the rich Buddhists helped with donations, the Sinhala Buddhist intelligentsia (including *Anagarika Dharmapala*, *C. Don Bastian*, *C. Martinus Perera* and *Walisinha Harischandra*) responded by writing pamphlets and articles, speaking at meetings and forming local level temperance associations and Buddhist organisations for religious and social work.

In this connection, it is relevant to give a few examples of the Sinhala Buddhist fervour of the traders. For instance, *N. S. Fernando*, who had started with a small shop in 1875 and had become the first Sri Lankan importer of paper and stationery by the late 19th century, only employed Buddhists in his shop; not only was he very devout, observing all Buddhist rituals and financing a 'pilgrims rest' in Anuradhapura, but he also began a journal in Sinhala for traders called *Velanda Mithraya* (The Merchants' Friend) and published a Sinhala translation of 'The Arabian Nights'[5] Similarly, another leading Sinhala merchant, *D. D. Pedris*, who had a drapery shop in Colombo, helped to finance the Buddhist movement. He was the main importer of Indian saris, and was supported by the Buddhist press in a campaign to promote the sari as a national dress for women of the country,[6] especially for the women of the bourgeoisie who dressed in the latest Western fashions. Significantly during the anti-Muslim riots of 1915, both N. S. Fernando's and Pedris' sons were sentenced to death for inciting crowds to attack rival Muslim shops in the Pettah, (the non-European commercial quarter of Colombo).

While the Buddhist traders gave generously to temples and schools and financed the temperance movement, they in return were supported in their business ventures by the Buddhist press and the Sinhala petty bourgeois intelligentsia. Jayasekera has pointed out how, as early as 1888, the *Sarasavi Sandaresa* wrote against "alien exploiters", and up

to 1915, Buddhist papers continuously attacked the dominant trading position of minorities and called upon the Sinhalese to boycott Muslim shops and eating houses. Such attacks in the media against foreign and minority traders were often written by bhikkhus, school teachers and leading personalities of the Buddhist movement. Anagarika Dharmapala, for example, frequently wrote on this theme, praising the Sinhala merchants for having accumulated wealth by fair means and calling upon them to support patriotic causes,[7] while denouncing the "merchants from Bombay and peddlars from South India" who dominated the trade of the island.[8]

### III. Revivalist Ideology and Communalism.

The Buddhist revival was undoubtedly an agitational movement with semi-political overtones. The Buddhists challenged the privileges of Christians in colonial society; they attacked missionary education and aimed at imparting a more relevant education to Sri Lankan children in Buddhist schools. They exposed social evils such as drunkenness which they attributed to foreign rule, and, inbued with the puritanism which is characteristic of revival movements, they criticised the decadence of society under colonial rule, contrasting it with the ancient culture of the Sinhalese. However, the main emphasis of the movement, as symbolised in Anagarika Dharmapala's campaign in Anuradhapura in 1903, revolved more around ridding the sacred city of churches, taverns and butchers shops, rather than ridding the country of foreign rule. In the context of the time, such religious agitation- as well as the Buddhist temperance movements of 1904 and 1912 - were merely signs of an incipient nationalism and were only semi-political in content. But given the nature of the class that led such movements, the nationalism continued to remain "incipient" and the agitation remained "semi-political"-confined to taunting British officials on marginal issues such as temperance, rather than challenging British imperialism in a serious way.

There was no 'national bourgeoisie' with basic economic contradictions with imperialism, which was sufficiently strong



or mature enough to lead these religious-cultural agitations into a fully-fledged anti-imperialist movement. The old land-owning families stood solidly by the British; the new segment of the bourgeoisie agitated only for class privileges and, not too dissatisfied with the constitutional reforms of 1912 and 1923, did not launch an agitational struggle against the foreign rulers. Even the leaders of the temperance and Buddhist education movements did not question the continuance of British rule; their activities were carefully limited so as not to appear disloyal, being confined to "nibbling at sedition" as Herbert Dowbiggin, the Inspector General of Police perceptively reported.[9] This weak bourgeoisie was thus incapable of creating among the people a national consciousness based on rationalism and a scientific outlook or of leading a struggle based on the concept of a Sri Lankan nation. The very nature of merchant capital activity, which did not require the application of science and technology, probably prevented the growth of a modern rationalist outlook among these groups; contacts with foreign rational and liberal thought remained at a superficial level, without affecting seriously their practice or their consciousness. They were thus more susceptible to the traditional ideologies and superstitions that were dominant among the other classes. In this situation, where a Sri Lankan consciousness could not arise, the need of the new class for an identity that it could espouse vis-a-vis the foreign rulers and foreign economic interests, was met by a revival of older identities based on the familiar traditional categories of religion, caste and ethnicity. Rather than being swept away by the winds of nationalism and national unity, the older forms of identity were given a new lease of life, resulting in communalism, casteism, a distortion of history, a revival of myths of origin, and hero-myths along with the creation of visions of a past 'golden age'.

In discussing the ideology of the Buddhist revival, one can trace three inter-connected myths linked with racial and religious origin which gained popularity during this period. They were:

(a) the myth of the "Aryan race" and the view that the Sinhala speaking peoples belonged racially to this group.

(b) the 'Sihadipa' concept, namely the myth of the landing in Sri Lanka of Vijaya and the founding of the Sinhala "race"

(c) the 'dhammadipa' concept and the myth of Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka and his special relationship with the island.

In this connection it must be noted that 19th century European Orientalists who studied the Sanskrit language, found that it had links with European languages and assumed that this presupposed a common racial origin. The linguistic discovery had many repercussions and led to the theory that the Aryans were a racial entity rather than, as Romila Thapar says "a group of people who spoke related languages". The latent racism in this theory was used by political thinkers of 19th century Europe, including Gobineau in France, Chamberlain in England and Schopenhaur in Germany, giving ideological content to racist (and later Fascist) theories based on the myth of racial purity and the superiority of the Aryans. The Hindu revivalists of India not only appropriated the Aryan myth, but also eagerly propagated the Orientalists 'golden age' vision of the "ancient Indians as a people with an idyllic society" and laid stress on Vedic culture as the root of the Indian tradition.[10] The glorification of the Aryans as the chosen people who 'civilised' the earlier inhabitants and who were the sole originators of Indian culture, was put forward as historical fact.

All these false theories and myths which were floating around at the time were eagerly picked up by the Buddhist revivalists in Sri Lanka who, in the absence of a strong, nationalist ideology were turning inward in their search for an identity. They adopted the doctrine of racial superiority, glorified an idyllic past and associated the Sinhala people with the chosen 'Aryan race', and the chosen Buddhist faith. The Aryan concept occurs in the writings of the Buddhist leaders of the period such as Anagarika Dharmapala, who consistently maintained that "the Sinhalese... in whose veins no savage blood is found... stand as the representatives of Aryan civilization".[11] Linked with this was the myth of the



landing of Vijaya and his "Aryan" followers from Sinhapura in Bengal, rather a strange legend given the fact that the Bengalis themselves do not claim to be Aryans. Vijaya (according to the Mahavamsa), was the founder of the Sinhala 'race' and landed in Sri Lanka on the day of Buddha's death. Interwoven with this '*Sihadipa*' idea, that civilisation began in Sri Lanka with the landing of Vijaya and the founding of the Aryan Sinhala race, is the "*dhamadipa*" concept of the special role of the Sinhalese as guardians of the Buddha dhamma. For not only was it believed that Buddha visited Sri Lanka three times, but on his death bed he is also said to have asked Sakra to protect Vijaya in his historic mission to Sri Lanka, the land where the *dhamma* would flourish for five thousand years. In this way were intertwined the racist theory of Aryan origin, the traditional myths of Vijaya and the divinely ordained mission of the Sinhala 'race' to protect the Buddhist religion. Racial purity and religious purity were thus combined and the 'pure Aryan Sinhalese' became the appointed guardians of the 'pure doctrine' of Buddhism.

What were the logical concomitants of such arguments and which classes found inspiration in this types of mythology? The implications of the Sinhala - Buddhist ideologies were clear - for if the Sinhala people could put forward claims to being the first civilised inhabitants - and therefore the legitimate 'owners' of the country - all other migrants who came at a later date were regarded as 'foreigners'. The concept thus grew that Sri Lanka was the *land of the Sinhalese* and that non - Sinhalese who resided there were allowed to do so by grace and favour of the Sinhala master 'race' who had prior rights of possession and were the exclusive 'sons of the soil'. This idea was typified in a statement that Anagarika Dharmapala made in 1922: "Look at the Administration Report of the General Manager of Railways... Tamils, Cochins and Hambankarayas are employed in large numbers to the *prejudice of the people of the island* - sons of the soil, who contribute the largest share".[12]

The second implication was that Buddhism was the religion of hdammadipa - and all other religions were merely tolerated on

condition of good behaviour. In addition if the minority communities were non-Sinhala and non- Buddhist, they were by definition both racially and religiously inferior and were "infidels of degraded race". as Anagarika Dharmapala (in 1912) described Tamils, Muslims and Europeans.[13] Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism, founded on the myths of the golden age that were an integral part of the Buddhist revival, permeated the writings of many of the novelists, dramatists and journalists of the period. To mention only a few examples, in *Piyadasa Sirisena's* novels, the heroes and heroines were devout Buddhists and proud Sinhalese, and minorities of all ethnic groups and religions were the object or bitter diatribes. In 1909, as editor of the Sinhala Jathiya, he called upon the Sinhalese to "refrain from transactions with the Coast Moor, the Cochin and the foreigner".[14] Similarly *W. A. de Silva* in his novels did not hesitate to make contemptuous references to Tamils and Muslims, while many of *John de Silva's* plays glorified the ancient rulers of Sinhala kingdoms, lamented the contemporary degeneration and issued an emotional call for the revival of earlier values and traditions.

The popular appeal of such ideologies (which exist even today) may be explained by the fact that the Sinhala peasantry and petty bourgeoisie of small producers, small traders, and urban 'white collar' workers lead an uncertain life between the bourgeoisie and working-class, their bitterness aggravated by the competitive activities of minority groups in trade and employment-all factors which were seen to threaten the 'small man' s already tenuous economic existence. It may be that the very precarious nature of their lives and their narrow horizons made it easy for them to fall back on , and find solace in grandiose events-in past glories, in the heroism great leaders, in myths of high status origin and in victories against the "historic enemy and the defeat of the 'invader'. Where the contemporary competitor belonged to an ethnic minority which had suffered defeat in war in an earlier epoch, such episodes as the Dutugemunu-Elara confrontation were revived, given a false interpretation as a war between ethnic groups and misused for building up communal hatred.



In conclusion it may be stated that communalism appeared from the time of the Buddhist revival onwards as a vicarious nationalism supported by the weak Sinhala bourgeoisie. This communalism was also prevalent among the Sinhala petty traders and the Sinhala rural small producers and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie who believed they had little chance of rising in the economic or political spectrum; ideological support for such views were provided by the Sinhala intelligensia and Buddhist monks who were keenly aware of the decline of traditional culture that had occured under the impact of alien culture. The urban working-class being weak and not having developed a proletarian consciousness was also amenable to the petty bourgeois chauvinism of the time. This was no doubt aggravated by the fact that important sections of the working class, in the plantation and urban areas were non - Sinhala. In this context the Sinhala Buddhists who felt economically hemmed in, politically oppressed and culturally deprived, were to find succour in racist myths and legends and were to give vent to their frustrations in attacking ethnic and religious minorities, thereby espousing the retrograde ideology of communalism which Bipan Chandra has correctly described as "the false consciousness of the historical process of the last 100 years"[15]

## Footnotes

1. For example **Jeronis Soysa**, who paid £38 in 1829 for the right to run a tavern at Kadugannawa, invested £7,000 in the Central province arrack rents for 1836 which gave him a profit of £1,800. In 1837, he became the first important local coffee planter, buying 400 acres in Hanguranketa for £411. His son **Charles de Soysa** was the leading Sri Lankan capitalist by the 1870s, with interests in coffee and coconut plantations and graphite mining. Charles de Soysa's sons were educated in Britain and his sons-in-law were eminent doctors and lawyers with qualifications obtained in Britain.

2 Many of the early arrack renters were given loans by Chettiars and the Chettiar had a prominent place at Sinhala upper class weddings, since he had often advanced the money for the dowry and the wedding.

3 Correspondence Relating to Disturbances in Ceylon, Command paper HMSO, London, Chalmers to Secretary of State. Cd. 8167 of 1916, p. 3.

4. A Cabral, **Return to the Source**, New York, 1973, p. 43.

5. A. Wright, Twentieth **Century Impressions of Ceylon**, London 1907, p. 474.

6. P. V. J. Jayasekera, **Social and Political Change in Ceylon**, 1900-1919, PhD Thesis, London 1970, p. 328.

7. Ibid. pp. 103-7.

8. The Mahabodhi, Oct. 1909.

9. Sri Lanka National Archives, Confidential Paper No. 14502 of 1915. For details of this period see Kumari Jayawardena, **The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon**, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1872.

10 R. Thapar, Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History, in **Communalism and the Writing of Indian History**. R. Thapar, H. Muhkia and Bipan Chandra, New Delhi, 1969, pp. 2-3.

11. Anagarika Dharmapala, 'History of an Ancient Civilisation, (1902) in Return to Righteousness, ed. A Guruge, Colombo 1965. p 479 - 483.

12. Anagarika Dharmapala, 'A Message to the Young Men of Ceylon (1922) in Return to Righteousness, op cit p. 514-5.

13. Sri Lanka National Archives, Confidential Report No. 14502 of 1915 quoting the Sinhala Baudhaya.

14. Quoted in Report 14502 op. cit.

15. B. Chandra, Historians of Modern India & Communalism, in **Communalism and the Writing of Indian History**, op. cit, p 38.



# Communalism and the Labour Movement in Sri Lanka

**Neil Kuruppu**

All human societies which are pluralistic in structure (and very many are so) today face the basic and general problem of how they can be organised in a truly democratic manner to ensure effectively the cherished democratic freedom for every individual. In such societies we see the emergence of different social groups which acquire corporate identities based on various distinguishing features. On the one hand there are the basic class formations and decisions stemming from the relations of production and the ensuing social relations, and on the other, different social groups based on common sentiments attached to such factors as race, religion, language among others which help to give them a certain sense of ethnic identification and group consciousness. Such social groups existing within a social system dominated by an evolving world capitalist system which organises human activity both international and intra-national, in a highly competitive manner, find themselves in a situation of conflict and tension generated by the whole system itself. This conflict and tension always tends to be intensified, and even becomes explosive, because of the crisis-ridden nature of the system. In the rich and developed countries, inflation, stagnation and attendant unemployment pose critical problems while in the less developed parts of the world, not only do these problems become a hundred-fold more so, but in addition, make poverty and social deprivation assume colossal proportions.

It is in this context that we have to examine the whole question of communalism and the labour movement in Sri Lanka. The communal problem as it manifests itself in this country is essentially concerned with the Tamils in Sri Lanka, who are themselves divided into two groups - the Sri Lankan

and the Indian. While factors such as race, religion, language, customs etc. have helped to give these groups a sense of separateness from the Sinhala majority, the fact that both groups are concentrated in particular territorial areas has also helped to identify such feelings of communal separateness. This is especially the case with the Sri Lankan Tamils whose small Jaffna habitat in the North is located in the arid zone of the island, far removed from the comparatively large and predominantly Sinhala South in the fertile regions of the Wet Zone. Further, the fact that religion and kinship have for centuries, been formative factors in the evolution of human societies, has also helped to promote and reinforce the sense of ethnic identification and corporate identity which these groups have come to acquire. This is particularly so in the context of our society today, where the struggle for social survival and betterment is both individually and collectively acutely competitive, and where economic growth and development is both retarded and distorted. It is not surprising then that the conflicts and tensions which arise out of the horizontal class divisions and attendant class exploitation, tend not only to cut across but also to be subsumed under those arising out of communal cleavages and resulting antagonisms which are of a vertical character. Hence the labour movement in this country, which the Marxist parties came to dominate and which they sought to develop politically as a means of promoting the class struggle, encountered in communalism a major impediment to its unfettered growth in this respect. A brief historical survey of the movement in this country will help to illustrate this thesis.

The organised labour movement assumed national importance only after the advent of A. E. Goonesinha into public life in the second decade of this century. It is significant that, even before Goonesinha emerged as an organiser of labour and its undisputed leader in the next decade, there were manifestations of communal bickering and division amongst the workers belonging to an important sector of the working-class in Colombo. To quote Kumari Jayawardena, "The Ceylonese railway workers, who feared competition from the Indians – who were poor, more docile and therefore potential



'blacklegs' – had manifested their hostility to Indian immigrant labour on several occasions. In 1910, for example the locomotive workers had protested against the influx of South Indian workers on the railways, and in 1913, presenting their grievances before the Railway Commission, the workers complained that Indians, Tamils and Malayalis were employed in preference to Sinhalese",[1] The British colonial authorities too, on their part, were quick to learn their lessons from the 1912 Railway strike and the 1915 riots, and sought to exploit communal differences amongst the workers. In fact, the Governor of Sri Lanka, Sir Robert Chalmers, in his desptach of July 1, 1915, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, stated "In order to safeguard the future, it may be advisable to modify substantially the present proportions, which show 1000 Sinhalese out of a total of 1600 employees".[2] It is however to the eternal credit of Goonesinha that, for a while, he was able to unite and organise under one banner quite a large number of workers including important sections in the harbour and railways, centred in the city of Colombo. Strongly influenced by the British Labour Party and favoured by the relative prosperity of the 1920's, Goonesinha was able to organise the Labour Union, in 1923 and in 1928 the Labour Party, the Ceylon Mercantile Union and the All—Ceylon Trades Union Congress, as their principal founder and dynamic leader. Quite justifiably at that time, he was able to state very proudly that these labour organisations were open to all irrespective of caste, race and creed. And so for a time, Sinhala and Indian workers joined hands to fight for their rights and better working conditions. K. Natesa Iyer, the South Indian Brahmin journalist, who became a radical politician and had begun organising labour on the plantations since 1925, joined Goonesinha's Labour Union and became its Vice-President for a short time. In 1927 during the harbour strike led by the Labour Union, he was influential in getting the Indian workers to support it. With Natesa Iyer's growing influence and leadership among the Indian workers both in Colombo and in the plantations, it looked for a moment as if the working-class as a whole in the country would rapidly advance

to new heights of class-consciousness, solidarity and action. But it was not to be and almost immediately the situation began to change for the worse.[3]

By the end of the 1920's the world wide economic depression had set in, and with it there were threats of mass unemployment. Once again, there was competition for employment between Sinhalese and Indian workers, and Goonesinha had cause to complain of undercutting of Sinhalese workers by their Indian counterparts. Thus communalism once again, and with greater force, began to rear its ugly head to divide the labour movement. With the issue of universal franchise, raised by the proposals of the Donoughmore Commission at this time, middle-class Ceylonese politicians began talking of the dangers of enfranchising Indian plantation workers, and the Ceylon National Congress uncompromisingly and bitterly opposed the extension of the franchise to plantation workers as recommended by the Donoughmore Commission. In this situation. Goonesinha himself, while not publicly opposing such an extension, showed his limitations as a labour organiser and leader. He had come to espouse the cause of the workers as an avowed nationalist and social reformer drawing inspiration from men like Gokhale and Gandhi in India and Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka. Professing to follow their example he worked, he said, to fight for the rights of the underprivileged and oppressed 'underdogs' in society. The workers, as a large and important section falling into that category, therefore claimed his prior attention. He was thus never interested in the cause of the workers as really constituting a class in itself, and ultimately for itself, in the Marxist sense of the term. In fact, Goonesinha studiously avoided, for the most part, all fraternal contacts with Communists. His Labour Party's aim was laudable but vague, general and populist, and not really class-oriented. It sought to promote "The political, social and economic emancipation of the people". Moreover as a man imbued with the growing nationalist sentiments of his time, he was motivated to a very large extent by that spirit of national resurgence which moved the leaders of the Sinhala Buddhist majority in the country. It was, however, a spirit which could



be readily provoked to express itself in the form of Sinhala chauvinism and communal prejudice. To Goonesinha therefore the forging of an all-island working-class unity was not a primary concern, and to him consequently, the Indian worker was politically dispensable.

Thus it was that in 1928, Natesa Iyer became convinced and alleged openly that Goonesinha was an anti-Indian, Sinhala Buddhist communalist. This brought the parting of the ways and Goonesinha expelled Natesa Iyer from the Labour Union in that very same year. In the following year he took the still more drastic step of expelling all Indian workers from his union; he alleged that they were undercutting Sinhala workers, especially in the harbour, in collusion with Indian employers. by contravening the agreements regarding the minimum wage fixed by the first Collective Agreement between the Employers' Federation and the Ceylon Trade Union Congress signed on June 1, 1929. The situation was still further aggravated when three strikes led by the Labour Union at Lake House in 1929, at the Times of Ceylon in 1931, and at the Galle Face Hotel in 1934 ended in disastrous defeats, contributing decisively to the decline and fall of Goonesinha as the undisputed labour leader of the city workers. In two of these strikes, the one at Lake House and the other at Galle Face Hotel, Indian workers were used as 'blacklegs' to break the strikes. This provoked Goonesinha into adopting a very anti-Indian attitude, and his Sinhala paper 'Veeraya', in 1930 proclaimed that the decline of the Sinhalese was due to the 'white man, the Coast Moors, Borahs and Malayalis'. In 1931 in the State Council, Goonesinha resolutely and uncompromisingly opposed the unrestricted immigration of Indian workers into the island. In fairness to him it must be said that he publicly stated that his intention and desire was to safeguard the interests of "Ceylonese workers" as against immigrants who were a floating population. However, according to a cyclo-styled statement issued by Natesa Iyer in 1929, he alleged that "Goonesinha differentiated between Indian and non-Indians in the distribution of rations during the harbour strike" (of 1927) and that he even spoke against the granting of

the franchise to Indian workers declaring that he would "Kick the Indians out". Whatever the truth of these allegations it is clear that Goonesinha's attitude was essentially that of a petty bourgeois radical and nationalist inspired by the Sinhala Buddhist revival of his times. He was not therefore in the long run concerned with trying to build an island-wide unity and solidarity of the working-class, overcoming the tensions and conflicts arising out of communal feelings and the antagonisms they engender.

The way in which the spirit of communalism adversely and retrogressively affected the labour movement in the early 30's was ominous for its whole future in the country. It was no passing phase of the movement, for this upsurge of communalism cannot be attributed only to such subjective factors as the limitations of individuals and leaders in the labour Movement with their prejudices and attitudes. It has to be explained by examining a more basic factor, namely, the particular structure that our society came to assume during the period of British colonial rule. In this country British rule was imposed on a society, which for centuries had hardened into a traditional form, functioning in a very decentralised manner and based mainly on the units of family, caste and village communities. Furthermore the country itself had come to be territorially divided into a Tamil Hindu North with a minority community and a Sinhala Buddhist majority predominant in the rest of the island, but itself divided into a low-country maritime region in the South and South-West and a Kandyan region in the central mountainous parts.

In such a land, with a society so structured, vertical divisions and cleavages tended to be stronger and more operative than horizontal stratifications and divisions based on class and class exploitation. This was the country in which British rule established a centralised government with its machinery and administration, and created new class divisions with its introduction of a particular form of the capitalist mode of production. This capitalism was in consequence significantly different from



its highly developed form in the metropolitian centres of the West. The colony, which became essentially a part of the agricultural periphery of the centre, was economically exploited on an externally oriented basis to serve the needs of that centre. There was therefore no real industrial development and no wide-spread development of generalised commodity production. This colonially imposed capitalism was therefore established essentially in the commercial sector of the economy. It was characterised by the plantation enclave system with its estates located in or near rural areas, and also by the dominant role assumed locally by merchant capital operating through agency houses with their firms and offices together with the banks and insurance companies, all centred in Colombo.

The necessary consequence of these developments was the emergence of new class formations with their horizontal stratification into social groups. But, as we shall see this new class stratification was not able to supersede entirely the vertical social cleavages which characterised the traditional type of society inherited from the past. The new local capitalist class that arose was drawn from various sources. There were those from the traditional land-owing oligarchy, and also those others who had made good in the commercial sector, as contractors, arrack renters, forwarding agents and also as general merchants. While many of them were owners of large plantations, almost all were also landed proprietors of some standing. Although this class had its basic common interests, it contained more than one group amongst whom were manifested rivalries promoted both by the inherent competitiveness of the system and reinforced also by undercurrents of family and caste feeling, social gradings, religious sentiments and also of larger communal separatist tendencies.

This, however, does not explain the relative weakness of this class which was really due to the fact that its members had only a supplementary role to play in the colonial economy as the junior partners of foreign capitalist and imperialist interests. The elitist leaders of this

class were all united in agitating for a greater share of political power and ultimately for political independence, but they were only capable of playing an oppositional role asking for more and more concessions. Their specific class interests could not lead them to a revolutionary confrontation with the imperial government. The political leadership of this class, not surprisingly, soon came to be dominated by a group belonging to the Sinhala Buddhist majority. However, at first having a common cause in their opposition to foreign rule, there were no manifestations of communal antagonism, but from the 1920's, with the growth of territorial representation, the implementation of the Donoughmore constitution and the grant of universal franchise in 1931, and ultimately with the gaining of political independence in 1948, the situation underwent a dramatic change.

Now there arose an overwhelming need for anyone desiring and seeking political power through the electoral process to win the votes of the majority. In this case, the majority happened to be the vast mass of Sinhala Buddhist folk in the rural areas. Moreover this section of the population was one that had to a large extent economically, politically and socially been submerged under British rule as an underprivileged and deprived social group. Their grievances, hopes and aspirations came to be effectively articulated by their own Sinhala speaking intelligentsia of writers, teachers, vedamahatmayas (indigenons physicians) and monks. Thus it was that bourgeois nationalist politicians, however much they talked glibly about national unity and harmony, began to appeal to Sinhala Buddhist sentiments, tending thereby to exploit communal feelings when it came to the actual struggle for political power. The temptation and tendency to resort to such methods was all the greater in that it helped a great deal in diverting emerging class conflict and struggle, with its potential revolutionary threat to the whole bourgeois class, into politically less dangerous, but often socially more disruptive forms of expression. More recently, bourgeois politicians masquerading under a facade of populism, have on the one hand not only exploited communal feelings, but also on the other, begun to mouth a socialist-sounding rhetoric.



Placed somewhat indeterminately below this upper social stratum made up of the capitalist class, there has arisen an intermediate layer constituted largely of predominantly clerical white collar workers employed in both the private and public sectors. This group which is essentially a salariat, was in the British colonial era, a moderately well-to-do and even socially privileged section of the population. Many amongst them had close family connections with those in the upper elitist groups. However, with the introduction of Sinhala and Tamil as the medium of education and the enthroning of Sinhala as the official language on the one hand, and the worsening economic conditions on the other, this group which now includes large numbers drawn from the rural sector and has also a sizable female component, is fast becoming one that is facing severe economic oppression. But even perhaps more important is the fact that with the acute competition for jobs and promotions especially in a situation of frustrating unemployment, communal antagonisms tend to be easily roused among many of these workers.

We have next to consider the working-class that arose in the country and its own characteristic features. What strikes us above all is that it has its own particular structure. On the one side we have the plantation workers. The vast majority of whom are employed on tea estates. These plantations have been organised to function in an enclave system in the externally oriented commercial sector of the economy. The very large number of Indian plantation workers who are employed in this enclave, constitute a labour force predominantly Hindu and Tamil, and are also both immigrant and in effect indentured. Further, organised as a resident and captive labour force, they work under semi-coerced and semi-serf conditions with little effective mobility. Living in such conditions, these workers have had only very tenuous social links with either the neighbouring indigenous Sinhalese village folk or with the rest of the largely indigenous workers whose main centre of employment was and is Colombo. This meant that there was a real structural separation of these plantation workers from the island's population, while a class-based, fraternal link-up with the

rest of the country's working-class posed major problems relating to communication, organisation and effective class mobilisation. These problems were soon to assume a serious political character. Also significant is the fact that these workers were therefore far from being a modern industrial proletariat.

The other section of the working-class which is largely Sinhalese, but which also contains a number of Indian workers is centred in Colombo, working as they do in the infra-structure of the public and private sectors. The Sinhalese workers in this category, however, have their own significant characteristics. They are for the most part necessarily drawn from the rural subsistence sector, from where, with bleak prospects of earning a much-needed money income to eke out their existence, they gravitate to the towns and especially to Colombo. Most of them, though not completely divorced from the means of production or from their rural habitat, find themselves so impoverished that they have to sell their labour power to survive in society. While some have come to live in certain parts of the city (or towns), very many still continue to live in their rural homes and commute to work. Amongst these workers, however, there has arisen today a comparatively small upper-crust who may be said to constitute a labour aristocracy, employed in sectors requiring greater skills. But what is most important is that therefore quite a large number of this indigenous work-force, by the very conditions of their social existence, are also not really typical of a modern industrial and city proletariat. The majority of these workers, liable as they are to be influenced by the ideology of the ruling class, are to a great extent provne to be incited by its appeals to communalist sentiments and prejudices. This seems to be so, especially because bourgeois politicians have now begun to use populist slogans to manipulate the masses for their own ends. In such circumstances, when politicians play on communal feelings, there is a dangerous tendency for it to distort working-class consciousness, helping to divide and disorientate the workers.



It was in a society so structured, where communal and other similar vertical social cleavages were continually interacting with the newly emerging class formations, that the Marxist parties came to dominate the labour movement in this country from the mid 1930's. As was to be expected, there was a conscious and very organised attempt to make the working-class both a class in itself and for itself. The labour movement was henceforth to be developed as a means for furthering the class struggle to achieve, ultimately, avowedly socialist objectives. And so it was, with great credit to the Marxist movement, that within the labour movement and to the extent that the influence of the Marxist parties prevailed, communalism and all such reactionary social cleavages were wholly eschewed both at the trade union and party levels of organisation. Individuals, irrespective of caste, creed or communal differences, were able to participate effectively in such organisations and even attain to positions of responsibility and leadership.

The Bracegirdle episode, the leading role played by the LSSP in the Mooloya and Wewesse strikes, the impressive performance of the Marxist parties in the 1947 General Elections to the new parliament, the strike waves of 1946 and 1947 and the great Hartal of August 1953, all seemed to augur well for the labour movement. It looked as if the struggle to realise a socialist order through the development of the movement as a means of furthering the class struggle was going to reach fruition in the not too distant future. Soon, however, once again the situation began to deteriorate, and reactionary class forces cleverly and cunningly exploiting communal issues proved to be major impediments.

D. S. Senanayake by his citizenship acts disenfranchised quite a large number of Indian plantation workers. This not only helped to marginalise socially and politically the Indian worker as a kind of national outcast, but also served to strengthen the communal division, and give fillip to the growth of Trade Unions like the Ceylon Workers Congress with a strong Indian communal consciousness. This was indeed most regrettable and retrogressive when we consider

the fact that in elections to the State Council in the 1930's Indian workers had in large numbers voted for a Sinhalese as against an Indian in Badulla, for a Sinhalese as against an Indian in Nuwara Eliya, and again for a Sinhalese as against an European who belonged to their employer class. It was S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, however, who with his own political brew of Sinhala, Buddhism and Socialism not only succeeded in taking quite a lot of political wind out of the sails of the Marxist parties, but also helped the political emergence of social forces which resulted in bitter communal strife. J. R. Jayawardena by his agitation in 1957 against the attempt of Bandaranaike to give some demands of the Tamils (under the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam) pact only further aggravated the situation. The result was that both in 1958 and 1977, we had not the bloody red revolution which the Marxist parties were supposed to bring about, but other very bloody and horrendous eruptions of communal violence, unprecendented in recent times.

Socially disruptive as such frenzied and destructive manifestations of communal violence were, more significant, perhaps, was the fact that the social atmosphere that bred such regressions to atavistic and savage forms of primitive tribal behaviour, had its own disorientating influence on the Marxist parties themselves and their followers. They found themselves abandoning their demand for parity of status for the Sinhala and Tamil languages - a demand which with hindsight we may now say, though correct in principle, was, alas, so infelicitously and inaptly formulated. In their opposition to Dudley Senanayake's political coalition with the Tamil Federal Party, it was indeed regrettable that vulgar communal feelings were generated. No wonder, then, that workers marching the streets in their May Day processions under the red banners of Marxist parties were to be heard vehemently shouting slogans against Tamils. This was, of course, in essence, nothing but a most reprehensible and regressive way of giving vent to low and latent communal passions and intensifying Sinhala - Tamil antagonism. Thus, onee again the class struggle had been submerged and subsumed under the upsurge of a blind and irrational communalism.



From this brief survey of the labour movement it is evident that while communalism helped to promote, but not originate, the organisational separation of the Indian plantation workers from the rest of the working - class, and also to disrupt the healthy growth of trade unionism in the 1920's, it did not prove a major obstacle to the growth of working - class consciousness especially at the trade union level. Thanks mainly to the leadership and influence of the Marxist parties, the largely indigenous section of the working -class saw the growth and development of trade unionism among its ranks with no communal divisions. This seemed to indicate that the workers were generally ready for concerted action as a class, especially with regard to their economic demands. Even over political issues they proved to be capable of such action, especially under the dynamic leadership of the Marxist parties.

Thus while it is true that under the leadership of both Goonesinha and the Marxists the labour movement did have a major impact on the course of national politics, it failed however, after six decades, to emerge as a really strong decisive and independent political force in the country. Undoubtedly, the shortcomings and inadequacies in the leadership provided both by the radical reformism of Goonesinha (even though linked with a militant unionism) and by the Marxist oriented Left parties, despite their professedly revolutionary ideology, have been subjective factors contributing towards this process. However objective conditions and factors have also been very largely responsible for, and it would appear, even more determinant in producing such a situation.

Sri Lanka in the historical process of its evolution has seen the emergence of a society, which over two millenia hardened into a traditional mould only to be caught up in the bind of under-development generated by colonialism both old and new. This has been characterised by (i) a lack of any real industrial development (ii) the consequent emergence of a relatively weak working-class being structurally divided and communally riven, and (iii) the presence of an overwhelmingly large and comparatively backward rural sector. In such a

social set - up the capital versus labour class conflict has not succeeded in becoming the pivotal point around which national politics has revolved. Numerically preponderant and exerting strong and widespread political pressures is that social strata comprising the urban and rural white-collar workers, urban and rural petty functionaries of the public sector-teachers, ayurvedic physicians, petty traders and, Buddhist monks and such others. In fact the violent swings in the political pendulum as manifested through the electoral process from 1956 onwards, only too well indicate how strong and widespread are the political pressures of this social strata (which perhaps may be characterised as petty bourgeois). Jaffna itself with no substantial working-class, manifests the political pressures of similar social strata. In such a social context it would appear that politicians of the essentially reactionary type, with their rank opportunism, are only too ready to exploit, communal sentiments, passions and prejudices for their own needs. Thus it is that in the final outcome the capitalist class which is economically dominant, succeeds in retaining also its political dominance, while the working-class itself has yet to realise its potential political strength especially as a radical and revolutionary force.

The labour movement, while it has undoubtedly brought major advances in the trade union sphere and won some significant political rights and concessions for the working-class and played a major role in the development of a mass political movement, has, however, still to become a pivotal and overwhelmingly decisive force in national politics. In this sense it has not been able to counter effectively the socially disruptive and politically reactionary influence of communalism, which together with the use of specious populist propaganda, is being insidiously exploited by reactionary class forces for their own political ends.

### Footnotes

1. Kumari Jayawardena, **The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon,** Duke University Press, North Carolina 1972, p 174.
2. ibid, p 178,
3. ibid, Chapter 11. Also A. E. Goonesinha, **Unpublished Memoirs** and Neil Kuruppu, **A. E. Goonesinha - A Nationalist Labour Leader,** unpublished study.



# Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness of the Tamil Community

**K. Kailasapathy**

In describing the growth of cultural and linguistic consciousness of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, one cannot treat it in isolation, especially from the political and economic factors that formed the bases for such a consciousness and the inevitable interplay of the two. However since the political and economic factors have been dealt with elsewhere, I propose to limit the scope of this paper to the cultural and linguistic aspects. One preliminary observation ought to be made at the outset. The cultural and linguistic consciousness of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka has always been influenced by developments in India in general and South India in particular. This applies to politics as much as to culture; accordingly, the major events in India during the last hundred years or so have had their impact on the Tamil community: the rise of the neo-Hindu movements-Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission-the founding of the Indian National Congress (1885), the partition of Bengal (1905), the Swadeshi Movement (1906-1915), the different regional movements that arose in South India which eventually crystallized in the emergence of the DMK, and the movement for the formation of linguistic states are some of the more significant events that have contributed to the cultural and linguistic consciousness of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Although there have been, and there continues to be, certain avowed socio-cultural differences between "Sri Lankan Tamils" - who have been living in this country for centuries - and the "Tamils of Indian origin" - those who came here during the heyday of the plantations - both sections have shared the common characteristic of looking up to India

for cultural and spiritual sustenance. Language, religion, myth and history have doubtless contributed to the survival of this feature, which is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the average Tamil. Along with these may be considered the individual influences of personalities like Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1948), both of whom visited Sri Lanka and especially Jaffna, where they were accorded rousing receptions and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), who also visited Jaffna on more than one occasion. (Special mention must be made of Coomaraswamy's address at the Jaffna Hindu College in 1906, in which he referred with pride to his Tamil ancestry and having spoken highly of the Tamil language emphasized the need "to preserve and protect the national ideals and Eastern traditions.")

Tagore 1934

The evolution of the cultural and linguistic consciousness among the Tamils should be seen in this general background. Having delineated the general scene, one has to see the phenomenon more closely.

It is generally accepted by most scholars on the subject that in many Asian countries political nationalism was preceded by religious awakenings that arose in response to Christian missionary activities. The point needs no elaboration. However, what should be pointed out is that this religious awakening was, at least on the surface, of a dual nature. In their response to the proselytizing activities of the Christian churches, the indigenous religions reacted in two different ways; one reaction appeared to concede the necessity for reform in the traditional religions and thereby obliquely accommodated some of the stances of the Christian church. This attitude was pronounced among the English educated middle-classes who were exposed to westernization. The other reaction was essentially revivalist in character and argued for upholding traditional beliefs and practices. In the case of Indian history it has become customary to cite the Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj respectively for the reformist and revivalist trends. It is of course, arguable, and rightly so, that the two trends were never mutually exclusive and the differences were more apparent than real. Both the reformers



and the revivalists came from the Hindu upper castes, but while the former were not only English educated but also used that language for their livelihood and for acquiring social status, the latter were primarily traditional in their education and used their mother tongue for their livelihood and social communication. From this one may postulate another hypothesis: the religious awakening and the activities connected with it took place at two levels or planes. The reformists were, because of their broader vision and greater exposure to non-traditional cultures, and higher social position in their society, prone to take a liberal and compromising position. Besides most of them wrote in English. (One may illustrate this by the writings of Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, Sir P. Ramanathan and Sir P. Arunachalam all of whom took a keen interest in Hinduism and Indian philosophy and wrote in English. They translated from Tamil into English. In doing so they probably had a particular audience in mind–an audience to whom they wanted to prove the antiquity and greatness of their tradition.)

In contrast, the revivalists were mainly highly erudite in their mother tongue and wrote in it. Their audience was the local intelligentsia engaged in the professions and the self employed who were of respectable stock and generally landowners. In other words, the religious awakening and fervour can be seen at the larger national level and the local level each with their adherents and their followers. If one might use the term 'elites' to describe these people, then a distinction can be drawn between the national and local elites. Bearing in mind the fact that such a distinction is never mutually exclusive we may adopt it for our analysis.

The religious revival among the Hindus in Sri Lanka was largely due to the pioneering efforts of Arumuga Navalar (1822–1879). This is not the place to narrate in detail the crucial and seminal role played by him in kindling a consciousness among the Tamils in Sri Lanka (and South India) about their spiritual heritage. In many ways Navalar could be compared to Dayananda Saraswathi (1824 – 1883) who founded the Arya Samaj in North India. What Dayananda did for the Vedic

religion in the North, Navalar accomplished for the Saiva-Agamic faith in South India and Sri Lanka. Hailed as the father of modern Tamil prose, originator of public-speaking, the first non-Christian to write and publish Tamil text-books for primary and secondary schools, pioneer textual critic, an innovator in grammar, and founder of Saiva schools, Navalar bestrode like a collosus, the Hindu-Tamil world of his day. Utilising the profound knowledge he had acquired while helping Rev. Peter Percival with the Tamil translation of the Bible, Navalar counter-attacked the Christian missionaries who were publishing tracts ridiculing the Hindu gods and scriptures. Navalar started publishing pungent pamphlets against the Christians and initiated a movement to win back those who had been converted to Christianity. (Here again one can see a parallel between Navalar and Dayananda Saraswathi whose concept of *Shuddhi* "reclamation or reconversion" helped to fortify the cracks in Hinduism). As a writer of polemics Navalar had few equals. He was followed in this by almost all his disciplies, among whom the notable ones were Siva Sangara Pandithar (1829 - 1891). Senthinatha Iyer (1848-1924), and N. Kathiravel Pillai (1874-1907). The activities of Navalar led to the founding of the Saiva Paripalana Sabhai (Society for the Preservation of Saivism) in 1888, and the Jaffna Hindu High School in 1890 which was later renamed Hindu College. An editorial in the *Hindu Organ* (July, 1899) makes the point clear.

> The idea of a College founded by the Hindus for the Hindus was conceived about thirty years ago by the late lamented Sri La Sri Arumuga Navalar Avergal, whose distinguished labours in the field of Saiva religion and literature mark an epoch in the history of Jaffna. Owing to want of co-operation which, we are sorry to say, is a blot on our national character, the proposal made by Navalar fell through, though he made a beginning and started a High School at Vannarponnai, which owing to the opposition of the Wesleyan Missionaries, the Government refused to register for grant. The idea conceived by Navalar was given practical shape to by the Sabhai, which in the year 1890, founded the Jaffna Hindu College.



The paramount role played by Navalar was not confined to the religious and educational fields, No doubt his contributions to the two were unique and far reaching. But Navalar had a social outlook that went beyond that of any other Tamil religious reformer of his time. He had unhesitatingly thrown his weight behind the campaign against the Government Agent of Jaffna W. C. Twynam whose measures were extremely unpopular. He organized relief measures - providing meals for the needy during the severe famine in 1876; he was the force behind the founding of the Jaffna and Batticaloa Commercial and Agricultural Company Limited, whose prime purpose was to develop agriculture in the Trincomalee District. He pioneered the temperance movement; just before his death he campaigned for the selection of P. Ramanathan as the Tamil Representative to the Ceylon Legislature in 1879 to fill the vacancy created by the death of Sir M. Coomaraswamy in May 1879. Conineveg a meting of the prominent personalities in Jaffna, among whom were merchants, public notaries, engineers, vidanes, udayars and a sub - magistrate. Navalar drew up a memorial to be sent to the Governor (Sir James R. Longdon), requesting that Mr. P. Ramanathan be appointed "a member of the legislative Council to represent the interests of the community." Thus Navalar created the climate for Ramanathan to enter active politics and rise in the ladder of public life.

Navalar was thus able to combine his interests in the religious field with practical actions that were vital to the community and mingle both socio - politics and religion. This was a major contribution to the subsequent cultural awakening among the Tamils.

But there was another aspect to this. Navalar, it may be remembered, spent several years in Madras in lecturing and publishing. But many others - C. W. Tamotaram Pillai (1832-1901) V. Kanagasabhai Pillai (1855-1906), T. Chellappah Pillai, T. A. Rajaruthnam Pillai, T. Kanagasundaram Pillai (1863-1922), T. Saravanamuthu Pillai, Sabapathy Navalar (1843-1903) and N. Kathiravel Pillai (1874-1907)-virtually spent their lives in South India holding positions in government service and

publishing their works with a sense of dedication rarely seen in later times. They did visit Jaffna off and on and founded schools in their villages or helped others to find avenues of advancement in Madras. Such close links between Jaffna and Madras were something new. It was true that there had been traditional connections between the two regions populated by people speaking a common language and cherishing a common cultural tradition. But the earlier links were sporadic and few and far between. Probably there were more traders, soldiers and adventurers than scholars and poets. The opportunities under British rule to travel to India freely not only revived earlier bonds, but also established new relationships that were different in quality. By living and working in the midst of the Tamils in South India, who were themselves experiencing tremendous changes, these scholars from Sri Lanka engaged in a two-way traffic of ideas and movements that ushered in a new era. These scholars considered themselves part of the mainstream of Tamil culture and contributed to it as much as they received. In fact, during the time of Navalar and about three decades after his death, it was the 'Jaffna School' that dominated the literary scene in Madras. The late A. V. Subramania Ayyar (1900 - 1976) has rightly remarked that the most eminent Tamil scholar in the last quarter of 19th Century was perhaps C. W. Tamotaram Pillai "He belongs to the band of Jaffna Tamil scholars and is next in importance only to Arumuga Navalar, who exercised considerable influence over him and his literary work.'

In passing it may be noted that Tamotaram Pillai was one of the first two graduates of the Madras University passing the degree in 1858; the other, Viswanatha Pillai (1820–1880) was also from Jaffna. Later Tamotaram Pillai was a member of the Madras University Syndicate and also "appears to have been Advisor to the Madras Government on matters relating to Tamil."

While the "Jaffna Scholars" were making their presence felt in South India - lecturing, teaching debating, editing and publishing - they were also witnessing the nascent stirrings of the cultural nationalism in Tamilnadu. Although Navalar



seems to have missed the impact of the publication of Bishop Caldwell's (1814 - 1891) *Comparative Grammar of Dravidian Languages* (1856; revised edition 1875), Tamotaram Pillai and others unmistakably show the influence of that work. I have elsewhere dealt with the subject and need not delve into it here. Suffice to say that by theorising about the antiquity and independence of the Dravidian languages *vis a vis* Sanskrit and the Indo - Aryan languages, Robert Caldwell "set in motion a train of ideas and movements whose repercussions and consequences went beyond the field of philology."

Of course Caldwell was not entirely alone in postulating a glorious history for the Tamil language. There were other European missionaries who put forward the Dravidian case. But it was Caldwell's *Comparative Grammar* that summed it up. Already in the lengthy and controversial prefaces to the critical editions of ancient Tamil classics brought out by Tamotaram Pillai - *Virasoiyam* (1895) and *Kalitokai* (1887), we hear echoes of Caldwell's assertions about Dravidian and Tamil. Not only the classical works - both literary and grammatical - but also the medium of those creations had become an object of veneration. The modern linguistic consciousness of the Tamils can be traced to this period. The patron saint of the movement was ironically enough a Christian missionary.

By about 1880s, the Tamil elite both in South India and Sri Lanka had become quite enthusiastic about their language, culture and history. The landmark was of course the publication of a verse play *Manonmaniyam* (1891) by P. Sundaram Pillai (1855–1897) who was professor of philosophy at the Trivancore University College. In that celebrated work he had described Tamil as 'Goddess' The language had been declared divine and thereby sacrosanct. These events were taking place in South India with the full participation and contribution of Sri Lanka Tamils. An indication of the growing awareness of languages and culture was the commencement of the publication of two journals; *Siddhanta Deepika*. 'The Light of Truth' (1897–1913), and *The Tamilian Antiquary* (1907–1914). A recent researcher's observation on the two journals clinches the point.

"The two journals cover roughly two decades – the period of the flowering of Tamil Renaissance. This period represents an awakened interest of Tamil scholars in Tamil language and literature benignly guided by the flair and persuasive enthusiasm of the European scholars..... These two journals have done yeoman service in creating in the minds of the Tamils an abiding interest in their Language and Literature, and in infusing a spirit of social confidence with regard to their literary and cultural heritage."

What is pertinent here is the fact that Tamil scholars of Sri Lanka actively participated in the publication of these journals. *The Siddhanta Deepika* was edited by J. M. Nallaswami Pillai (1864–1920), and the *Tamilian Antiquary* was edited by Pandit D. Savariroya Pillai (1854–1923). The former was a District Magistrate and the latter a lecturer at St. Joseph's College, Trichy. A perusal of the pages of the volumes of these journals will demonstrate both the quantity and quality of the contributions by Sri Lankan Tamils: P. Arunachalam, P. Ramanathan, S. W. Coomaraswamy (1875–1936), A. Muthutamby Pillai (1858–1917), V. J. Tamby Pillai, T. Ponnambala Pillai and a few others seem to have been regular contributors to these journals. Arunachalam's translations appeared under the initials P. A. Nallaswami Pillai was an ardent admirer of Navalar and cherished the writings of Sri Lankan Tamil scholars. Pandit Savariroya Pillai was encouraged by two well-placed Tamils from Jaffna who held responsible posts: T. Ponnambala Pillai was commissioner of Excise in Travancore. His brother T. Chellapah Pillai was a justice in Travancore. T. P. Masilamani Pillai was the son of the former who also wrote articles in the *Tamilian Antiquary*. On his return to Sri Lanka after his retirement, T. Chellapah Pillai was elected President of the Saiva Paripalana Sabhai.

The case of Pandit Savariroyan brings us to another point. Although the cultural awakening began as a Hindu movement and was predominently led by Saiva scholars, its character changed over the years. The prestige accorded to Christian missionary scholars, (Caldwell, Percival, Bower, Pope,



Ellis) and the endeavours of scholars like Savariroyan brought the Christians into the mainstream. Furthermore, with the shifting of focus from religion to language, the importance hitherto attached to Saivism became less significant. (In fact, the active role played by local Christian scholars both in India and Sri Lanka, from the time of Savariroya Pillai – L. D. Swamikannu Pillai (1865–1925) Fr. S Gnanapiragasar (1875–1947) Dr. T. Isaac Tambyah (1869–1941) and Rev. Fr X. S. Thani Nayagam – in the cause of Tamil has, at times, led to the allegation by some Hindus that the Christians have infiltrated the Tamil cultural movement.)

The events mentioned above had, without doubt, their effect in Sri Lanka. The concern for the Tamil language manifested itself in various ways. A number of societies and associations were formed for its protection and development. As may be expected, Jaffna led the way. As early as 1898 a Tamil Academy was established in Jaffna by the efforts of T. Kailasapillai (1852–1939) nephew of Arumuga Navalar on whom had fallen the mantle of the great savant. It is interesting to note that Pāndi Thurai Thevar (1867–1911), the Zamindar of Palavanantham, Ramnad District, founded the Madurai Tamil Sangam in 1901, inspired by the Jaffna Tamil Academy. This trend gathered momentum during the next few decades and a number of associations were formed. (The Colombo Tamil Sangam was formed in 1942). Conferences and meetings were held to celebrate different aspects of Tamil language and literature, one such meeting was held at the Ridgeway Hall in Jaffna in 1922, presided over by A. Kanagasabai. This was the first major literary conference in Jaffna and to befit the occasion, leading personalities from Madras were invited. Among them were Dr. S. Krishnaswamy Iyengar (1871–1947), K. Subramania Pillai (1889–1945) a staunch Tamil revivalist, P. V. Manicka Naicker (1871–1931) a language enthusiast and A. Madaviah (1874–1925), the novelist. Sir Vaitilingam Duraiswamy presided over the proceedings of the second day. T. A. Thuraiappa Pillai (1872–1929) who was the founder of Mahajana College and himself a poet and playwright took an active part in this conference. In the same year the Arya-Dravida Basha Development Society was inaugurated.

The pattern of development seen in the case of the Tamil language was paralleled in the case of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy, characterized as the indigenous religious thought of the Tamils. Following the early lead given by Navalar in restoring its prestige and strength, numerous associations sprung up in different parts to foster it. Reference has already been made to the Jaffna Saiva Paripalan Sabhai. In South India the Saiva Siddhanta Samajam was founded in 1905. Hitherto the *Mutts* or Saiva monasteries were the sole custodians of Saiva religion and philosophy. But now laymen considered it their bounden duty to preserve them. The Samajam became the association *par excellence* for the propagation of Saiva Siddhanta and several prominent Tamils from Sri Lanka took a leading part in its activities: distinguished Sri Lankans were often invited to deliver lectures at the Samajam and also preside over its annual sessions. J. M. Nallaswami Pillai was closely associated with the Samajam.

Sociologically speaking the linguistic and cultural awakening described above, was essentially that of the middle-class Tamils with the upper middle-class providing the leadership. The awakening which began in the religious sphere extended to the linguistic and literary fields. Basically it was a form of cultural self-assertion in the face of colonial domination. The point is that this cultural consciousness was limited in scope and in effect, designed to buttress the middle-class values and aspirations and also provide that class with the necessary image for leadership. In concrete terms, the cultural activities were confined to a few conspicuous areas: being backward looking in its orientation, the middle-class sought to revive and cultivate certain features of Tamil culture that had become part of the established order in the old society. In so far as language was concerned, the zeal for *Sen-Tamil*, "Cultured Tamil" or Classical Tamil" which for all practical purposes was moribund, (although Sir P. Ramanathan and his son-in-law and political successor S. Natesan created a vogue for speaking in the classical style), was the basis for the founding of societies and the holding of conferences. *Bharata Natyam* and *Carnatic Music* were the two forms that came to be considered the necessary artistic acquirements



for a cultured Tamil girl. Both were extolled as "Tamilian arts and achievements" and soon became the preoccupation of middle-class Tamils. *Bharata Natyam* in particular had been resuscitated in the early twenties by the efforts of people like Bharata Iyer, Rukmani Arundale (who founded the Kalakshetra, which has remained the outstanding Dance Academy in Madras) and G. Venkatachalam whose critical essays helped propagate the traditions and ideals of that dance form. During the 18th and 19th centuries, *Bharata Natyam* had become degraded, and called "nautch-dance", performed by courtesans and prostitutes. While scholars and critics from G. Venkatachalam to the late Professor V. Raghavan contributed immensely to the resurgence of *Bharata Natyam*, it was perhaps, in the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy that the dance form found its greatest champion. Two of the earliest monographs of Coomaraswamy were *The Mirror of Gesture* (1917) and *The Dance of Shiva* (1918) both of which have inspired almost all subsequent writers on *Bharata Natyam*. Likewise Carnatic music had been brought from the court and temple to the concert hall and along with the dance form, acclaimed as divine arts. Thus we see that Tamil language, *Bharata Natyam* and Carnatic music were deified and thereby denied the possibility of experimentation and innovation. It goes without saying that considerable affluence was the precondition for the cultivation of these arts and it was the upper classes that could afford them. As a result, popular arts suffered and became even more debased and deprived of support. It is therefore not surprising that until the late 1950s and early 1960s there was hardly any significant movement for studying and cherishing the popular arts or what is often described as 'folkarts'. This lack of interest in folk literature and arts was no doubt a reflection of the intrinsic class bias of the patrons of art and culture. Needless to say the "ancient and divine arts" were carefully guarded against any political intrusions, especially of any ideas tinged with social reform or change. To put it differently, artistic forms which are periodically revitalized by the absorbtion of radical ideas and giving expression to them, were kept hermetically sealed by the upper middle-class purely as status symbols and ethnic identity characteristics.

This was the nature of the linguistic and cultural consciousness of the Tamils until the 1950s. The most sensitive Tamil scholars and creative writers like the late A. Periyathambi Pillai (1899–1978) S. Somasundra Pulavar (1878–1953) N. Nallathambipulavar (1896–1951) and Thuraiappa Pillai always conceived Sinhala and Tamil as two eyes or two sisters or two companions and sang of a united happy home.

Post-independent political developments began to change this picture. The disfranchisement of about 900,000 of Tamils of Indian origin and the constant increase of Sinhalese seats in successive parliamentary elections and other events increased the awareness of the Tamils as a national minority. It is not fortuitous that in 1952, the Tamil Cultural Society was formed in Colombo. Its programme included not only the propogation of the history and culture of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, but also in other parts of the world.

Some aspects of the cultural consciousness at this period merit attention. Although South India continued to be looked upon as the 'mainland', it was nevertheless gradually receding into the background. The past and present history of the Tamils in Sri Lanka was unavoidably becoming increasingly important and experientially immediate. Whatever common links and bonds there were between the Tamils in Sri Lanka and South India, the two peoples were living under different governments and facing different problems. The dialectal differences too were becoming more evident. Thus for the first time, Sri Lanka Tamils began to manifest a keen interest in this land. No doubt the interest was mostly from the Tamil point of view. Questions such as when and from where did the Tamils come here? Are they autochthonous to the land? What is their relationship to the Sinhala people? What is their contribution to the culture and civilization of this country? These and other questions protruded to the forefront in ever increasing frequency and intensity. It is true that in the preceding decades Mudaliyar C. Rasanayagam (1870–1940), Fr. Gnanapiragasar, A. Muthuthamby, K. Velupillai (1860–1944) and others had shown interest in the history of the Tamils. Their attempts



were basically academic in character. But in the fifties, the historical writings were more than academic. There was an urgency and involvement in the quests. Professor K. Kanapathi Pillai (1903–1968) published his historical play *Sankili* (1956) which he prefaced with a "history of Tamils in Sri Lanka." This was followed by C. S. Navaratnam's *Tamils and Ceylon* (1958), and K. Navaratnam's *Tamil Element in Ceylon Culture* (1959) Nor was the interest confined to history. K. Navaratnam (1898 – 1962) who was a devotee of Ananda Coomaraswamy and had popularised some of his books in Tamil, brought out in Tamil the *Development of Arts in Sri Lanka* (1954). This trend continued to grow with the voices becoming more shrill and the tone overtly polemical. Some of the academic writings of this period found an outlet in the journal *Tamil Culture* (1952–1966) which was being edited by a Sri Lankan Xavier S. Thani Nayagam. It was printed and published in Madras. It carried academic articles like A. J. Wilson's "Cultural and Language Rights in the Multinational Society" (1953), Thani Nayagam's "Tamil Culture – its past, its present and its future with special reference to Ceylon" (1955) and also amateurish pieces like W. Balendra's "Trincomali Bronzes" (1953) and S. J. Gunasegaram's "Early Tamil Cultural Influences in South – East Asia" (1957). H. W. Tambiah published his *The Laws and Customs of the Tamils of Ceylon* 1954) probably responding to the prevalent mood. A recent contribution to the subject is *Tamil Culture in Ceylon* by M. D. Raghavan. Generally speaking, the concept of Tamil culture was given a wider significance and interpretation. C. Sivaratnam's *The Tamils in Early Ceylon* (1964) reflects this tendency. There were also plans for the economic reconstruction and development of Tamil areas and World Tamil Unity. From this period, the Tamil cultural movement becomes overtly political and begins to show up its class character and ideological leaning.

It is at this stage that for the first time, the literary and cultural movement touches the traditionally oppressed sections of the Tamil people who had hitherto been beyond the pale. Both in South India and Sri Lanka, post-Independence problems created the conditions for the emergence of a band of writers



* An english Anjournal "The Tamil" with many articles by S. J. G. was edited from Colombo.

who came from the traditionally oppressed sections of Tamil society, that is, the lower castes. Many of them were attracted by Marxism and Communist organisations which provided them with a world view and also the confidence to struggle against exploitation and articulate their thoughts and feelings freely. As might be expected, their level of literary education was somewhat low. But they ushered in new experiences and visions into fiction, poetry and drama using hitherto unheard of dialects, idioms, and expressions. They were indifferent to "correct" Tamil itself as taught by school teachers; classical Tamil was of no concern to them. They in fact openly despised it and ridiculed its proponents. To them linguistic restrictions or restraints were akin to social and political oppression and all such barriers had to be broken down. Harrison's general observation in a slightly different context seems applicable here:

> Where language differences tend to coincide with class distinctions, language conflict is apt to coincide accordingly with the lines of social conflict, greatly increasing it. And if the language of the lower classes is spoken by them at a time when they increase in numbers, or when they gain a bigger share in political and economic power in the society, then the language quarrels will be part of a general process of their elevation in the society and of their gradual bid for increasing social power.

The cultural nationalism of the Tamils is today at the cross roads. It has two options before it. To tread the path of cultural isolation and chauvinism or to identify those features that are also common to the majority community and work out a democratic way of life. The choice would appear to be obvious. But to do that would also mean a national struggle by both communities obfuscating the veil of narrow ethnic interests and marching towards a social order in which there will be no exploitation of man by man.



# Some Aspects of the Social Composition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka

K. Sivathamby

Ever since each of the two major communities of this island began fighting against the deculturising effect of the socio-educational policies pursued by the British, by falling back on their feudalistic, religio-cultural roots, the characteristic feature of politicization has been the polarisation of the Sinhala-Buddhist and Hindu-Tamil groups. The mode of Sri Lanka's apprenticeship to parliamentary democracy (representation on the basis of ethnic and social groups) helped to consolidate this division. At the start there was a sharpening of the ethnic differences at the level of the emerging bourgeoisie, which they later, with the extension of the franchise, transmitted to the masses, at which level it became 'race riots'. The history of the constitutional reforms of this country, viewed in this light could also be seen as the history of the attempts made to determine the political status of the Tamils within a unitary Sri Lankan State. The interaction of the socio-economic motivations, the political demands and the ensuing constitutional adjustments has led to the emergence of language and religion (more language than religion) as the main planks in the process of decolonization.

Most of the academic attempts made to grapple with and elucidate this problem, have considered it sufficient to describe the events and delineate the trends. Thus the more deep-seated problems of inter-nationality relations were explained away as the "language issue" or more simplistically the "communal problem". It is true that this was a communal problem in that it arose because these "ethnic groups have developed an awareness of a common identity and have attempted to define the boundaries of the group(s)."[1] But it was something more too, for each of these groups had also

mobilized themselves for *political* action and were becoming politically significant. It is at a stage like this that a community transforms itself into a nationality. A better conceptual tool is therefore necessary to understand this process and the concept of nationality is more suitable. But the unconscious impact of the Western concept of the nation - state did not permit the politicians and the analysts to view the problem in that light. The preoccupation with the nation of "the language issue" also hid from their view the 'intra-communal' differences found especially among the Tamils. Except for a few (Arasaratnam, Wilson and Jupp)[2], others failed to highlight the significance of this situation found among the Tamils and indicate how it had influenced the formulation of the strategies adopted and solutions suggested by both the protagonists and the antagonists.

Even though there has been a general acceptance of the fact that the Tamils of Sri Lanka have genuine grievances regarding their rights as full fledged 'nationals' of Sri Lanka, there has been no unanimity of political opinion or action among the Tamils at any given moment or over a given situation. The closest ever the Tamils in this island came to closing their ranks was when the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) was formed in 1972 with the coming together of the Federal Party (FP), the Tamil Congress (TC) and the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) led by S. Thondaman, along with the Tamil M. P. in the United National Party (UNP), K. W. Devanayagam. But with the formation of the UNP Government in 1977 and with the inclusion of Devanayagam in the Cabinet and later with the absorption of Thondaman into the Cabinet (the political basis of this alignment has never been made clear), the TULF ceased to be a "front" in the original meaning of the term; it is now a combination of two parties - the F. P. and the T. C., the latter split into two over the choice of candidates in the elections of 1977 with a dissenting group under the leadership of Kumar Ponnambalam, son of its founder President G. G. Ponnambalam.

However it is at this time of dissensions and defections that the TULF has emerged as the voice of the oppressed



Tamils. It is important to note that it is the national situation that has helped it to emerge as the main opposition group in the parliamentary politics of this country. It is also of interest to note that the unilateral accommodations made by the ruling parties on the status of the Tamil language (both the SLFP and the UNP) have not been accepted as agreeable solutions because the TULF had not accepted them.

There is also another dimension to this problem which exhibits the internal contradictions within the Tamil 'community'. The defection of C. Rajadurai, the first M. P. for Batticaloa from the ranks of the TULF and the defense he made for his cross-over to the UNP that, among other things, his action would help the Tamils of the Eastern Province to develop themselves, is an indication that labelling the Tamil issue as just a language issue or communal problem would not be enough. The lukewarm attitude of the Tamils of the districts of Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mannar and Vavuniya to the issue of standardization and the provision of district quotas in University admissions - an issue which has more than any other factor led to the rise of a militant youth movement in Jaffna - is also very revealing. If, along with these, we take the utterances of S. Thondaman that he has joined the government in order to work for the alleviation of the conditions of the neglected Up Country - Tamils, it becomes clear that the Tamil problem is not just a language issue or a communal problem. We need to go beyond the limits of ethnicity to understand this problem in proper prespective.

It is significant that progressive opinion in this country now realises the need for a radical change in the attitude towards this problem and that the Tamils of Sri Lanka should be taken as either a nationality or a nation, having the inalienable right of self determination. This would therefore be an opportune time to analyse the character of the social composition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Such an analysis of the social formation would highlight the basic factors of Tamalian social organization which are very often understood only in terms of traditional images like culture

traits. Besides it would also throw light on the different socio-economic interests found among the Tamils, which have an important bearing on finding political solutions to their problem.

II

The word "Tamil" refers to the language and its users. The South Indian usage includes the Muslims too (quite often they are referred to as Tamil Muslims). But in Sri Lanka, Muslims have a separate identity. The F. P. therefore has been trying to popularise, with very limited success, the term 'Tamil-speaking peoples' The religio-cultural traditions and historical conditions of Sri Lanka have given the Muslims a separate political identity. Thus we are left with only the 'Tamils'.

It is a well-known fact of Sri Lankan history and politics that the Tamils in Sri Lanka are divided into two primary groups - the Indian Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils. The term 'Indian Tamils' refers mainly to those plantation labourers brought from South India in the 19th century and to their descendants, the bulk of whom are yet on the plantations; a small percentage of that group has migrated to urban areas and have become merchants or monthly-wage earners. This term also includes the South Indian merchants especially the Chetties, who had established themselves in Colombo and other provincial towns. There is a Chetty population in Jaffna town; this settlement is not directly connected with the above-mentioned migrations.

A closer look at the social organization of the Sri Lankan Tamils reveals that, in spite of ethnological homogeneity they would, in terms of geography, economic organization, social structure and level of development, fall into two distinct groups - (a) The Tamils of the Eastern Province (mostly referred to as Batticaloa Tamils and
(b) the Tamils of the North.

Here again, the second group has a further division - (i) The Tamils of Vanni and of Mannar district and (ii) the Jaffna Tamils..



An attempt will be made in this paper to go into the socio-economic foundations of each of these groups of Tamils and to indicate the relationships they have with each other. It will also be shown how inspite of the group rivalries there is an overriding urge for unity and solidarity which brings them all together as a nationality.

III

The "Indian Tamils" living in the plantation areas are the descendants of those Tamilian workers who immigrated from South India in the latter half of the 19th century. "Their social customs and practices, though essentially of the Hindus, differ from those of their co-religionists in Jaffna, Batticaloa or Trincomalee. The customs and ceremonies also vary according to their caste or village in India from where they originally came some 150 years ago".[3] The system of recruitment of labour at the Tamilnadu end, the physical isolation of the group here in the plantations, and the type of labour organization both in regard to their work and their trade-unions and above all their political isolation from the Sinhalese people among whom they worked, have cumulatively helped to preserve their separate identity and to maintain the caste continuities as they had operated in the places of their origin. As had been pointed out by Jayaraman "Adi-Dravida groups such as Pallans and Paraiyans have emigrated in large numbers and constitute more than half the emigrants to Ceylon. Vellalans, Kallans, Ambalakkarans, Agamudaiyans and other non-Brahmin caste groups form the bulk of the other half"[4]. In traditional caste ranking the Adi-Dravidas (Pallans, Paraiyans etc.) come much below the non-Brahman castes like Vellalans, Kallans, Ambalakkarans, Agamudaiyams etc. The Brahmins are at the top of the caste hierarchy. It has also been shown that there exists in the estates a definite relationship between the traditional caste hierarchy and the estate occupational hierarchy. "Generally, upper non-Brahmin castes such as Vellalag, Kallag, Agamudiyag and Konag are found in the higher positions of the occupational group".[5]

It is in this respect that we find a difference between the South Indian workers who immigrated to the Caribbean and those who came to Sri Lanka. Here in Sri Lanka the traditional social formation was preserved and thus has constituted a political problem of the type we do not find in Jamaica and other countries. One can do no better than quote Jeyaraman fully.

"The continuity of the caste system is the result of the interplay of certain other factors which may briefly be recapitulated here. First, the relative isolation of estate labourers form the wider Sinhalese society has contributed to the caste system. Further the host society has a caste system of a kind which is not inimical to the continuity of caste system among the immigrant labourers. Second the two important features of the immigration pattern viz., the large scale family immigration and the kangany system of recruitment prevented labourers from attaining anonymity. Third, the productive organization of tea plantation was not so disturbing as to break the traditional images of castes. Fourth, the formation of labour gangs under kanganies, particularly under sub-kanganies strengthened the caste and kinship ties. Fifth, there were informal sanctions such as social boycott and ridiculing in public which maintained caste norms. Finally the festival and ritual occasions provided an arena of caste activities."[6]

It is, however, true that there has been flexibility in this rigid structure and that discernible social mobility among the lower groups, though minimal, has been noticed. But even today, "inspite of these changes, caste has not ceased to be an important organizing principle of the Tamilian estate community".[7] The social organization of the estate population is of great interest because it shows how a capitalist organisation can make use of the traditional social organisation to ensure its continuity and further development.

But in the last few years, there have been many changes. The nationalisation of the estates and consequent retrenchments and displacements have forced the estate worker to migrate



to some of the agricultural areas in Jaffna, Mannar and Vavuniya districts. Working as farmhands under absentee landlords they are as much exploited as they were in the estates, but now live without the fear of communal riots.

The Indian Tamil community has had a closed existence and their very existence in such large numbers in the heart of the Sinhala region had been a source of anxiety to the Sinhala-minded politicians. No sooner the Donoughmore Commissioners recommended universal adult franchise, than the Sri Lankan government of the day had an Order-in-Council passed (1931) which resulted in the disenfranchisement of a majority of the Indian Tamils. The Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act No. 3 of 1949 effectively prohibited wide electoral participation of the Indian Tamils in the political life of the island.

It cannot be said that, up to the time of the formation of the Federal Party in 1949, there had been any political movement among the Sri Lankan Tamils which brought within its vortex the Indian Tamils. Even on the issue of the Citizenship Act, the Tamil Congress, whose leader (G. G. Ponnambalam) was a cabinet minister of the UNP government that brought in the legislation, was not with the Indian Tamils. In 1931, "the claims of the Indian Tamils were not considered important to the Ceylon Tamils..."[8]

As for the Indian Tamils, they too did not have a high opinion of the Sri Lanka Tamils. Of the Sri Lanka Tamils, it is only with the Jaffna Tamils that they had contacts and understandably enough "the Tamilians living in estates, particularly persons belonging to Vellalan, Kallan and other non-Brahman castes revealed a strong antipathy to the Jaffna Tamil".[9] The estate Tamils have always regarded the Jaffna Tamil as a selfish person and the Jaffna Tamil in his turn, had looked down on the estate Tamils as a people of low caste.[10]

But with the spread of the ideology of the DMK, many of the estate Tamil youth turned towards the FP. The FP

by persevering with its effort to unite all the Tamils had also endeared itself to some of the estate Tamil youth. It could even be argued that the compelling necessity for the Ceylon Worker's Congress (C. W. C.) to close ranks with the Sri Lankan Tamils was due partly to such pressure at its grassroots level. It is significant that the recent attempt on the part of the government to bring Vavuniya, traditionally a Sri Lankan Tamil area within a new revenue district that would make the Tamils a minority within that district was criticised by a spokesman of the CWC, even though its leader is in the Cabinet. However it should also be mentioned that in this district there are many Indian Tamils working as farmhands.

The separation of the Indian Tamil community from the Sri Lankan Tamil community could be seen in the fact that Indian Tamils played no active role in the Sri Lankan Tamil struggle over the constitutional status of the Tamil language (in 1956 and thereafter). In fact the Tamil language (Special Provisions) Act, which tries to accommodate the use of Tamil within a Sinhala only position, speaks of special rights for the use of Tamil in the Northern and the Eastern Provinces. The current constitution has slightly altered the position and this, S. Thondaman thinks, guarantees the right to use Tamil officially even in the estate areas.

A discussion of the causes for the continuing exclusiveness of the Indian Tamils, should, besides referring to the caste characteristics and to the uneven treatment they have received from the governments, which rendered a large majority of them stateless, also refer to the type of Trade Union organization they have had and the leadership it has provided. The historical conditions of the estate Tamil population had given the trade union which had an all Indian Tamil leadership an advantage over the other trade Unions, especially of those of the left parties. This advantage that the C.W.C. enjoyed could be traced to the fact that the trade unions connected with the Sri Lankan political parties, could not offer a satisfactory solution to the political problem of the constitutional status of those workers. The one exception was the trade union formed by the F. P. but even their trade



union has not fared well. The dominant hold the C.W.C. has tends to keep these Indian Tamil workers aloof from the rest of the working-class of this country.

As has been mentioned above, the socio-economic handicaps and the political isolation have not deterred them from falling back on their linguistic identity. Encouraged by the wide publicity given to their problems and the social acceptance consented to by the Tamil parties, the estate Tamils now call themselves the Malaiakat Tamilar (Upcountry Tamils).

The leadership of the upcountry Tamils, conscious of the geographical distribution of their population, i. e. the fact that they have to live in traditionally Sinhala areas, have openly dissociated themselves from the separatist demand of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF.) The Indian Tamil leadership also accepts the language policy of the present government – Sinhala and Tamil as the national languages of the country with Sinhala as the only official language.

Thus inspite of ethnic homogeneity, the social formation of the Indian Tamils has kept them away from the Sri Lankan Tamils. It could be said that it was only when the demands of the majority were articulated in extremely chauvinistic, ethno-centric terms, denying even the right of habitation in certain areas, that the Indian Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils came together in demanding joint political solutions.

## IV

As we move away from the Indian Tamils and focus our attention on the Sri Lankan Tamils, who are so named because they have been a part of the population of the country from early times, the important feature that should be observed is that they have been concentrated in two main areas, the Northern and the Eastern Provinces, so much so these two areas are considered the traditional homeland of the Sri Lankan Tamils. There had also been a substantial number of Tamils living in the Puttalam and the Chilaw districts. A perusal of the pre-Donoughmore political history

of Western rule in Sri Lanka would reveal the important role played in the political affairs of this country by the Tamils of that region, most of whom by that time had become Christians. But after years of acculturation and assimilation, operating mainly through the agency of the Roman Catholic Church, they have, except in a few pockets like Udappu, which is largely Hindu, lost their identity and have now merged with the Sinhalese.

Today the main traditional homelands of the Sri Lankan Tamils are the North and the East, Here again, even though on common ethnic terms they are taken as Tamils, there is substantial difference between the Tamils of these two areas. The relative geographical separation of these two areas along with the discernible differences in traditional social organization, economic pursuits and, more important, varied historical background and the pattern of population distribution have clearly marked them out as two distinct spheres of interests resulting quite often in the sounding of a double note in the political orchestration of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

V - I

The Eastern region has two main units - Trincomalee and Batticaloa and it is the latter that deserves closer analysis. The Trincomalee district in terms of social composition, seems to be a half way house between Batticaloa and Jaffna and because of the strategic importance of the natural harbour, has outstripped the other in importance and has significantly enough seen an increase of 40,192 Sinhala residents between 1953 (15,296) and 1971 (55,308).

The significant difference between the Batticaloa and the Jaffna Tamils could be seen in the traditional laws and customs in operation in each of these areas. If law is understood as the 'totality of rules for people's behaviour in society which expresses the will of the dominant group and which are established with the aim of safeguarding, consolidating and developing the social relations and public order advantageous to the dominant group,' then the Tesa Valamai laws and customs of Jaffna and the Mukkuva laws



and customs of Batticaloa could be taken as those which have arisen to safeguard the Vellalas and the Mukkuvas in Jaffna and Batticaloa respectively. It is true that these are only traditional laws and customs and that in cases of dispute the common law of the land is held supreme. But the very fact that these are in existence as laws and conventions shows that the traditional social organization in these two areas yet held sway in spite of increasing modernization and social change.

Even a cursory glance at the types of social organization that exist in Batticaloa and Jaffna would indicate how different one is from the other.

In the Mukkuva law the unit of the family is known as the *Kudi*. Britto defines Kudi as follows: "The term Kudi is used by all Tamil speaking classes of Batticaloa to mean every person who is related to one on the mother's side only. Persons of the Kudi however distantly related recognized each other as relations."[12] In contemporary Batticaloa it is not only among the Mukkuvas but also among the Vellalas and the Seerpadas (the other two major caste groups) the Kudi system is in vogue. The Vellalas have 12 Kudis, Mukkuvas 7 and the Seerpada group 13. The lower castes, which work for each of these major caste groups are known as "*Ciraikkudis*" (the bonded Kudis). The artisans and the serfs fall within the bonded Kudis.[12] The Kudis are exogamous clans and rights of property inheritance follow along the Kudi lineage. The Kudi system in Batticaloa is so vital to the socio-economic relationships that even the Muslims have adopted it. It also incidentally indicates the origin of the Muslims of Batticaloa. The Mukkuva law, matrilineal as it is, is integral to the organization of feudalism in Batticaloa. Unfortunately no definitive work has yet been done in this field. The feudal lord known as the Podiyar, unlike the feudal lord in Jaffna, is more often an active farmer.

This type of social organization is so different from the one that obtains in Jaffna, that the average Jaffna man has never comprehended the system and considers the Batticaloa man somewhat alien to his own social system.

The other major factor is that Batticaloa is largely agricultural and therefore the interests of the Batticaloa Tamil has not been the same as that of the Jaffna Tamil. In fact when immediately after the implementation of the Donoughmore Commission report there was a boycott of the elections in Jaffna, organized by the Jaffna Youth Congress inspired by the movement for swaraj in India, the Batticaloa Tamils did not participate in the boycott and E. R. Tambimuttu was elected to the State Council.

Perhaps the decisive factor in the character of political activities of the Eastern Province has been the preponderant number of Muslims in that region. The following table illustrates the position:

| | Batticaloa District | Trincomalee District | Amparai District |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sri Lankan Tamils | 177,275 | 65,905 | 60,519 |
| Sri Lanka Moors | 60,889 | 60,219 | 126,365 |

(Census and Statistics figures for 1971)

This has determined the character of the political demands. In fact it is the presence of a sizeable number of Muslims in Batticaloa that was responsible for the formulation of the concept of the Tamil speaking peoples instead of a direct use of the term Tamils.

The educational backwardness of the district had prevented the inhabitants of Batticaloa from enjoying their due share in the public service and professional occupations. The Jaffna man has been dominating officialdom and the administrative machinery. There has been a sharp reaction to this among the Tamils of Batticaloa and quite often anti-Jaffna politicians of Batticaloa have raised the "Yalppani domination" cry.

Inspite of these socio-economic differences, Batticaloa has played a significant role in the cultural revival of the Tamils since 1956; it has also been regarded as the repository of traditional Tamil culture, which has been seriously eroded in Jaffna due to missionary activity and English education. The movement for the revival of the Kuttu tradition prevalent



in the Batticaloa district has an important place in the rediscovery of the Sri Lankan Tamil traditions as distinct from South Indian. Swami Vipulananda, the first Tamil scholar ever to hold the Chair of Tamil in the University of Sri Lanka (he was first appointed Professor of Tamil at the Annamalai University, S. India) symbolises the contribution of the Batticaloa Tamils to the development of Tamil studies in both India and Sri Lanka.

Batticaloa, a seat of the cultural heritage of the Tamils, inspite of the fact that its socio-economic needs were very different from those of Jaffna, was brought into the movement of ethnic solidarity by the colonisation policy of successive governments, especially, in the Amparai district. The militant youth movement that started in Jaffna seems to have encompassed Batticaloa too and the government decision not to hold the elections for the Batticaloa Municipal Council indicates that, inspite of the cross-over of two TULF MP's to the government, the political mind there has not yet changed direction.

## V - II

Within the Northern Province one could mark out three different areas in terms of socio-economic bases - the Mannar region, the Vanni region consisting of Vavuniya and Mullaitivu districts and the peninsular region i. e. Jaffna district proper. The socio-economic situation in Mannar is somewhat similar to that of the Eastern province; commenting on the situation during the Donoughmore constitution era, Jane Russell said that "the Eastern Province Tamil member and Mannar member, for instance, represented quite different kinds of electorates from those of the Northern members. Those former named members were far more interested in agricultural policy than the public services, and they were more conciliatory vis-a-vis the Sinhalese, as a goodly position of their constituents were Muslims".[13] But the social organisation of the Tamils of the Mannar district does not differ very much from that of the Tamils of the Jaffna district. Here, among the Tamils, the Catholics are in a dominant position and they have had a history of conflict with the Hindus. In fact the bulk of

the Hindus of Mannar are Jaffna-oriented. The Hindu-Catholic conflicts over the re-discovery and the development of the historic Tiruketheeswaram temple are too well-known.

But here again the increasing popularity of the Federal Party and now the TULF has softened the Hindu-Catholic conflicts within the Tamils community, but the Muslims generally have always expressed their individuality by professing support to non-Tamilian political groups. The support the UNP has among the Mannar Muslims should be seen in this light.

Among the Tamil areas, the Vanni region had been the least developed. Though in terms of traditional social organization one does not notice any great difference from Jaffna, economic under-development has left an indelible mark on the society. Vanni has been largely a closed social system until recently and the main agents of socio-economic change had been the Jaffna migrants, both traders and agriculturists. The traditional Vanni inhabitants had thereby developed a hostility towards the immigrants from Jaffna to the extent of forming a secret organization the Yarl Akatti Sangam. (The Society for Removal of the Jaffna Man). In terms of economic demands the Vanni peasant is one with the Sinhala peasants of the Rajarata region. In fact during the period of S.L.F.P. rule there was some understanding forged with the Tamil politicians of the Tamil Vanni districts. But the action of successive governments in settling Sinhala peasant colonists in and around the Vavuniya district and the corresponding increase of Sinhala residents of the area has always given rise to Sinhala-Tamil conflict and confrontation in this district. Vavuniya has always been considered the Southern boundary of the Northern Tamil homeland and the increasing Sinhala settlements have made this the most sensitive area in terms of Sinhala-Tamil hostility. With the opening up of several agricultural development schemes in the Vavuniya district and the migration of the Jaffna peasantry into those areas, the Tamilian character of the population is being consolidated. Vavuniya district has the largest number of Indian Tamil labourers outside



the Central highlands. Even this is contributing towards the further strengthening of the Tamilian identity. The pressure of Indian-Tamil population - the over-flow from the estates- is very important for it is at this level that one sees a tendency towards an Indian - Sri Lankan Tamil merger through marriages. Being the border area, "communal" consciousness is markedly obvious. And there has been, of late, a revival of historical memories. The Vanni chieftains were the last of the Tamils to surrender their authority to the British and Pandara Vanniyan, the last Vanni chieftain killed at Katsilaimadu in 1803, is now presented as a great hero of the Tamils and the name of Kakkai Vanniyan who betrayed Pandara Vanniyan to the British regiment, has become synonymous with treachery and betrayal. Anyone who goes against Tamilian solidarity is now referred to as a Kakkai Vanniyan. Pandara Vanniyan has become the Puran Appu of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

## V - III

The Jaffna Tamils form politically the most articulate group among the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamil problem has often been presented as one of deciding the role and the status of the Jaffna man within the island. Jaffna, besides Colombo, was the earliest region to receive the benefits of modernization especially in relation to English education and the people from Jaffna have been enjoying a disproportionate quota of jobs as state officers, teachers and professionals; they are thus found in all parts of the island. The Jaffna trader, quite adventurous had also established himself in like manner. But inspite of their island wide distribution they have had a sense of exclusiveness which prevented them from being one with those among whom they worked. The one distinguishing characteristic of the Jaffna man is that he has always been Jaffna -centric. Jane Russell's characterisation of the Jaffna Tamil deserves attention:

> "The Jaffna Tamil man was fiercely conservative and he maintained a jealous pride in his attachment to the peninsula and to the language customs and beliefs of his ancestors...It could perhaps be termed a peninsularity

of mind, the spatial isolation of the Northern Province being its most conditioning factor. However when combined with a natural atavism stemming partly from the Hindu religion, an atavism which a British governor described as the preference of the Ceylon Tamil for the methods of his ancestors, this peculiar conservatism becomes an ingrained trait, The admirable virtues of the community has been well expressed by Sir P. Arunachalam: "I have great belief in the Tamil Community. They will be saved by their commonsense and marvellous industry, their innate disdain of comfort and spartan simplicity, their long knowledge and love of mother-tongue."[14]

It is important to understand these traits of the Jaffna man in terms of his socio-economic base. Clearly these characteristics of the Jaffna man mark him out as a distinct group within Sri Lanka and this is well expressed in the operation of the legal system, based not on the legislative enactment of any single man or power but evolved out of the traditions of the country, A literal translation of the term Tesavalamai, the law that governs property rights in Jaffna, would be 'traditions (usages) of the country'. The manner of its operation is very symbolic. A Jaffna man living outside would be subject to the norms of that area but within Jaffna the tradition of the place dominates and continues to dominate. The Tesavalamai law is very much unlike the Mukkava for the former is a peculiar combination of patrilineal and matrilineal societies. Though originally based on the Marumakkattayam law, its evolution in Jaffna has brought within it many patrilineal aspects, thus making it a unique combination peculiar to the people and the place.

Tesavalamai law also reveals the basic social organization of the Tamils of Jaffna. It is based on the caste system. Here again the ranking is quite different from that of the other Tamils, either in India or Sri Lanka. A closer analysis of the Tesavalamai law and the character of the caste - continuity would reveal it as Vellala-based; with even the Brahmin, though he occupies a position of ritual supremacy,



coming below him in social power and authority, The caste system as it operates in Jaffna is a form of social control exercised by the highest group.

The rather 'monolithic' view that Jaffna is all-Tamil would be not correct. Time and again it has been proved that it is the dominant Vellala caste (having for itself certain class characteristics) that has expressed its own needs and demands as the demands of the Tamils. Karalasingham has referred to this as "Vellala domination." Analysing the political history of Jaffna from 1933 to 1947, Jane Russell said: "Governed as they were by a 'peninsula' outlook, the Vellalas felt secure in their numerical predominance and without their active co - operation any effective social transformation proved impossible".[15]

An analysis of the social background of the leaders of Jaffna up to the time of the formation of the TULF would show that they have all been from the Vellala caste and it could also be seen that some of them were Janus-faced on this problem. The classic instance is that of Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan who opposed the introduction of adult franchise on the ground that it would give the lower castes the right to vote. He was also against the introduction of equal seating and commensality in Jaffna schools.[16]

A closer look at the way educational opportunities were provided by Hindu English schools would reveal that the depressed castes were largely left out. Even the Christian schools had to take cognizance of the caste system. It was the coming of the free-education scheme and the introduction of the Swabasha medium that radically changed the socio-educational set-up in Jaffna.

In terms of intra-political divisions among the Tamils of Jaffna, the caste system has played an important role and continues to do so. But here again politicization on ethnic lines has enabled the election for the first time of an M. P. from the depressed castes.

Even the traditional Hindu-Christian hostility seems to have lessened in recent times. Of late the Catholic Church

has produced clergymen who have identified themselves fully with the Tamil cause.

The main economic source of the political problems of the Jaffna Tamil has been the public services. The post 1930 Sinhala-Tamil relations were almost centred round this main problem of recruitment to the public services. Sir A. Mahadeva's statement -

> "Much of the gulf that exists today between the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities is due to the fear that there may be a lack of impartiality in the recruiting of entrants to the public services."

made in 1935 is as true today as it was then - the only difference being that the government of the day has accepted by implication the charge that there is a certain imbalance in recruitment.

Public service - oriented education had been an economic necessity in Jaffna and when efforts were made to solve the problem at the 'lower stage' of the provision of education (so that there would be no problem for the state at a later stage in providing the jobs), the character of political agitation in Jaffna changed, for the system of standardisation affected only the youth. With the departure from the island of those who had the education but not adequate opportunities, the Sri Lankan problem has been given an international standing.

## VI

The foregoing discussion on the Tamils indicates clearly the differences in the stand they take both in relation to each other and in relation to their general status within the national polity. More important, it also reveals the pattern of thinking behind the political actions of the successive governments in dealing with the Tamil problem in general.

An analysis of a group of people within a state and the impact it has on their political behaviour should by definition include a discussion of their class characteristics.



One factor. seen very clearly within the recent history of this question is that whenever the government in power adopts a Left-oriented economic policy, like nationlisation of estates or interventions into the private sector, the tendancy for Sinhala-Tamil polarisation - and the intensification of communal feelings have been very high. It would not be far wrong to see a close connection between the decision of S. Thondaman to join the TULF (as one of its Vice-Presidents) and the decision on the part of the then government to nationalise the estates and impose a ceiling on land holdings. So too with the opposition of the professional classes among the Tamils which has always been higher during the ULF or the SLFP periods of rule than during the rule of the UNP. Even if the latter were equally hostile, it is seen that a UNP government is able to evoke class unity and thereby minimise their conflicts with the activities of the TULF (as exemplified in the activities of the CINTA-Ceylon Institute of National and Tamil Affairs).

But a class analysis of the Tamils of Sri Lanka should not go along the lines of a rural - urban dichotomy. The position is definitly a complicated one. Any such analysis should first take into account the possibilities and the realities of the caste-class continuum. For, if it is true that a "traditional" social organization is able to influence the political behaviour of a group, as we have already seen, then such a social organization is not only "traditional" but also very "contemporary" in its effectiveness.

Here again there is no specific study done on the character of class formation among the Tamils. The attempt made here is, therefore, necessarily exploratory and very tentative.

The Marxist theory of classes as defined by Lenin provides a clue to the understanding of the problem of the caste-class continuum.

> "Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of

production, by their role in social organization of labour and consequently by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of requiring it". (A Great Beginning).

The social organization of economic production and the ensuing social relationships that are seen in the organization of feudalism in Jaffna (as 'fixed and formulated' in the Tesavalamai system) and in Batticaloa (as seen in the relationship between the podiyar or the feudal lord, the mullaikkaran, the lessee cultivator who pays fixed rent and the vayalkaran, the agricultural serf and in the constitution of the Ciraikkudis, bonded class), examined in the light of this definition, would unambiguously reveal the class - basis of the caste organization.

A further explanation of the method of social control exercised in a feudal society needs to be looked into:

"The main trend of social development (in the feudal society) was for a certain social organization, having assumed an exclusive right of discharging social functions in the sphere of legislation, administration of justice, education, religion and military affairs, to seek to obtain the largest possible share of the social product using the social institutions it had usurped to coerce the labour force" (Martin Siderov – What is Historical Materialism ? Moscow - 1975 - 42)

Understood in terms of the feudal conditions obtaining in Jaffna and Batticaloa, this clearly shows that the depressed castes in the traditional Tamil hierarchy are also the oppressed classes.

Euro-centric studies on the breakdown of feudalism show that the new class of bourgeoisie grew within it and led the struggle of the peasants to revolutionise it. The historical experience of this transition in the Asian countries has been different. Here in most cases defeudalisation took place under the impact of colonialism. We have already seen how in the case of the Indian Tamil workers on the plantations,



the feudal structure was made to conform to the exploitative demands of colonial capitalism. In the case of the Sri Lankan Tamils too, it is true, a bourgeois class arose within it; but the first groups that arose within it, historically speaking, did not destroy that system; in fact they strengthened it. Colonialism placed the landlord class in an advantageous position in that they were the only class who could benefit by the acts of "modernization" of the colonial rulers and also in that they could, with their new found social power of administrative authority, contain the new benefits within tbeir class. In fact it was the dialectics of the inescapable extension of the educational and social benefits given by the rulers based on the concepts of equality before law and the rule of law (along with the proselytizing activities of the missionaries, all of which brought in a sense of egalitarianism not experienced in the previous social order) that gave the lower castes/classes some taste of higher status and authority.

This is well demonstrated in the history of "modernization' in Jaffna. It has been shown that the "revivalist" movement in Jaffna headed by Arumuga Navalar was really an attempt "to contain the socio-cultural changes flowing from the very character of British administration, within the well-entrenched social framework of the Jaffna Hindu society and that the beneficiaries of these activities, by aim and choice, were the upper caste Hindus" (Social Science Review Vol. I, No. 1)

It is now a well known fact that in spite of the 'liberalism' of the British rulers, education and employment opportunities at the start went hand in hand with the caste system, except in small pockets like Manipay, where the missionary impact was rather high.

Up to the end of the Second World War, English education was virtually a monopoly in the hands of the high caste Hindu Tamils (except in the case of the non-fishing Karayars who along with an almost peer status in the traditional hierarchy, had also the benefit of the services of St. Patrick's

College, Jaffna, but this again was confined largely to the Catholic Karayars) and thereby also employment with the government. Making full use of the educational system which provided for English education within the denominational system, the upper caste Tamils - literally the emerging Tamil bourgeoisie - very often denied the same facility to the depressed classes and when admission was forced, equal seating was not given in class rooms. This was also the time when the 'drift towards Colombo' started. But within Jaffna, the system was further strengthened by the new employment opportunities found in the Federated Malay States. It is interesting to note that the new found economic affluence led to an abundance of building activity - building temples and schools which preserved the system effectively. And any Tamil outside Jaffna who wanted to go up the social ladder in his region came to Jaffna to obtain the English education that was a passport to advancement Even the Sinhalese from Rajarata came to Jaffna for their English education.

Thus up to the first three decades of this century caste and class went hand in hand. Social mobility, cutting across caste barriers, comes in only when the cumulative impact of the free-education system and the swabasha - medium education began to assert themselves and this happened around 1956. But 1956 also marks the awakening of the consciousness of the peasantry and the awakening of the national bourgeoisie on ethnic lines. This led to an interesting amalgamation of forces among the Tamils, i.e. the depressed castes and higher castes now closed ranks as Tamils. It was at a time when the depressed castes were getting organised on class lines, (not only though employment in government service but also through enterpreneurial undertakings) that the ethnic factor was brought into educational and employment matters. And when that tendency grew, the Tamils began voting for the FP or the TULF. It is significant that P. Kandiah of the C. P. was elected in 1956 and since then the Tamil districts have not voted for any Leftist.

It would be interesting to note that this had affected the fortunes of the Left movement in Jaffna which



really grew on an anti-caste basis. When there was inter-caste class collaboration, the strength of the Left movement declined considerably. The surviving base for the Left movement now in Jaffna is the intelligentsia.

A major consideration that has determined the character of the Tamil demands on the nationality issue has been the necessity for the middle-class Tamils to stay outside the Tamil areas because of their employment, trade or profession. The decreasing opportunities for such gainful occupation coupled with the realization of the economic potential of the Tamil areas, especially after the boost the cultivation of subsidiary crops received in the seventies, are tending to make even such groups support the demand for a 'separate existence'.

The class position in the other Tamil areas cannot be taken as having come up to any substantial level of consciousness. In Batticaloa the consciousness is rather low, except at urban centres, because neither "westernization" nor "modernization" have affected society sufficiently deeply as yet. Conversely, the pattern of settlements in the newly opened up agricultural areas in the Eastern districts is helping to increase communal consciousness and tension. In Vavuniya, the overflow from the plantations is creating an agrarian proletariat.

The presence of a substantial number of Tamils in Colombo, especially within the city. is an important factor to be considered in this discussion. Although the bulk of them are from the working-classes and the lower middle-class, there is an articulate group of industrialists and professionals, whose class associations have determined their attitude from time to time. They have also acted as a pressure group on the political advocates of the Tamil demands.

Unfortunately it is not possible to analyse the general trends of the development of class consciousness in this country and how ethnic considerations have manifestly become a motivating factor in socio-economic development, but it could be seen that the pattern of decolonization, or rather

the ideal relating to the 'decolonised state' that is in vogue has not rejected the symbols of power and authority derived through colonialist rule.

## VII

It is clear from the above discussion that the Sri Lankan Tamil problem arises from the very economic basis of the social composition of the Tamils. Both the uniting forces and the divisive factors arise from it. A cursory glance at the social formation reveals it as basically a problem of uneven (or irregular) development, sharpened by the mode of decolonization.

Decolonization in a country that has had almost four hundred years of colonial rule should not be based on the ideological assumptions received through the superstructures of colonialism; decolonization should take the form of an intense, inward search for the common social and economic bonds hitherto unrecognized and undiscovered. The process of decolonization will determine the character of the "genuine" independence that the country seeks and it should therefore be as democratic and morally justifiable as the anti-colonial movement had been, and by democracy is meant, political economic and social democracy.

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# Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka – Identity Stabilisation and Inter Ethnic Interaction

P. Devaraj

Ethnic processes and inter-ethnic interaction in Sri Lanka acquired a new dimension with the dawn of the colonial era. The advent of the Portuguese served to strengthen the connections and the two-way flow that existed between Peninsular India and Sri Lanka. In particular the connections with the neighbouring peoples in the Malabar and Coromandel coasts must have been further activated and reinforced. The introduction of the Catholic religion both in India and Sri Lanka probably led to a more extensive migration of such groups as the Bharathas who settled on the Western sea board from Colombo to Mannar. The Catholic religion and later Protestantism gave rise to new identity formations and far reaching changes took place in the relative positions of the earlier social groups.

With the consolidation of British power in Sri Lanka there took place a rapid acceleration of the changes that had commenced in Portuguese and Dutch times. The development of the plantation economy based on a labour intensive technique of production and the integration of the country in the imperial network of production and exchange brought many new changes, while the transformation of the indigenous social groups were further enhanced. Despite the plurality of ethnic groups the developments also gave rise to a new sense of Sri Lankanness that had been hitherto absent.

'Indian Tamil' is the official term of identity for the descendants of the 19th and early 20th century migrants who came to Sri Lanka mainly as plantation labour. It was in the 1911 census that this term of identity was first used. The total 'Indian Tamil' population at that time being 530,983. The 1921 census gives the following details of the 'Indian Tamil' population.



| | |
|---|---|
| 'Labourers' and their dependants | 536,148 |
| Non' Labourers' and their dependants (Estate and non-estate) | 66,587 |
| Total | 602,735 |

The 'labourers' were further subdivided into non-estate 46,846 and estate 489,302.[1]

The differentiation of the Tamils into Ceylon Tamils and Indian Tamils was made on the basis that "Ceylon Tamils" were those who could trace their origin to a Tamil District of Sri Lanka and 'Indian Tamils' those who could not do so. This identity classification has continued and is now established. The population of 'Indian Tamils' in 1946 was 780,589. In 1971 it was 1,174,606. In 1981 it was 825,233 The drop can be explained by repatriation under the Srima-Shastri Pact.

Besides 'Indian Tamils', other Indian migrants consisted, of various groups such as Malayalees and from the North of India Sindhis, Memons Borahs etc: Tamil speaking Indian Moors have not been included in the Indian Tamil population as they had a separate ethno-religious identity. Among the urban workers there was the community of "Arundadiars" who were engaged in Municipal services. Their origins and history differed from that of the estate Indian Tamils. The original language of the Arundadiars was a dialectal form of Telugu though they are now Tamil speaking.[2] The Bharathas or Paravars have a history of migration to Sri Lanka from Portuguese times. Some of them who settled near Negombo in pre-British times appear to have undergone an ethnic change. The Bharathas who came to Sri Lanka after British rule are mostly in Colombo and certain other urban areas. They are Tamil speaking and go as 'Indian Tamils' although their distinctness and difference from plantation based Tamils has to be noted. The upward social mobility of this group has been noticeable and they are to be found in all types of occupations.[3]

Another group of non-plantation migrants were the Nattukottai Chettiars who had acquired considerable prominence in the commercial life of the country. They are an entirely business community and are not to be confused with some other Chettiars or Chettys. Today there are only a handful of Nattukkotai Chettiars left in the island. There are also other small groups of Tamil migrants who have little connection with the plantation Tamil people. It is significant to note that whereas plantation workers came from the Tanjore, Trichy, Arcot, Madurai; Pudukkottai and Ramnad Districts, non-plantation migration was highest from the Tinnevelly District. Malayalee migrants from what is now the Kerala State were prominent among the non-Tamil migrants. Malayalees were in various professions and were government employees, harbour workers, toddy tappers, toddy tavern keepers etc. Since independence the number of Indians in urban occupations has declined considerably.[4]

The estate Tamil population unlike the urban groups has steadily increased since the 19th century and population increases in the island since independence have generally been accompanied by increases in the Indian Tamil population in the estates.[5] In 1961 the estimated Indian Tamil estate population was 949,684. A group of Tamil migrants who became settled in non-estate rural areas in some plantation districts and in the towns as artisans serving the plantation communities should also be taken together with the plantation workers. Unlike the plantation workers these non-estate migrants have progressed and developed with the rest of the community. Non-estate Indian Tamil settlers are specially to be found in Matale, Kangalla, Hewaheta, Kandy, Gampola, Nawalapitiya, Bandarawela, Haputale, Ragalla, Badulla etc. They are mostly small landholders or petty traders.

In the plantations, rigid controls, and the hierarchical structure of the plantation system created a captive labour situation and the workers were isolated in the estate enclaves living in "company towns"[6] allowing little room for change or upward social mobility. Workers on the plantations today live in much the same conditions as their fore-fathers did



in barrack-like back to back, zinc roofed enclosures each 10 ft. by 12 ft. housing entire families or more than one family within the enclosure. The appalling conditions of the estate lines have to be seen to be believed. The highest rate of illiteracy, the lowest level of educational attainment, poor health conditions, malnutrition, high infant mortality and ceaseless toil are a marked feature of the life of plantation workers. Despite all the obstacles a small number from among the Indian Tamil workers of the plantations have acquired education and moved into other occupations. There are some in the professions, government or mercantile employment. Most of the urban Indian Tamils today, unlike in earlier times can be traced to a plantation origin.

At the time of the Sirimavo-Shastri agreement in 1964 the total number of Indian origin people was estimated to be over 1.10 million. This did not include the small number of Indian passport holders. The number of stateless was estimated to be 975,000 and the rest were citizens. The Sirimavo-Shastri agreement considered a great triumph of diplomacy for Mrs. Bandaranaike[7] stipulated that 525.000 persons were to be granted citizenship by India over a period of 15 years and 300,000 persons to be granted citizenship over the same period. This accounted for 825,000. By an accord in 1974 between Mrs. Bandaranaike and Mrs. Gandhi it was agreed to equally divide the balance 150,000. A total of 375,000 were to be granted Sri Lankan citizenship and 600,000 Indian citizenship. The natural increase was to be absorbed by both countries.

Mrs. Bandaranaike informed parliament in December 1972 that there were about 240,000 applications covering 625,000 persons for Sri Lankan citizenship. This meant that the applicants for Indian citizenship fell far short of the required number. However, resulting from several subsequent developments that final total number who have applied for Indian citizenship is about 500,000.

If all the applications for Indian citizenship are accepted Sri Lanka can grant under the terms of the 1964 agreement

about 280,000 persons Sri Lankan citizenship. This would leave a balance of about 200,000 who would still be stateless. If to this 200,000 you add the natural increase the number would be approximately 250,000.

However, the present position is that only 176,000 have been granted Sri Lankan citizenship under the agreement whereas even according to the terms of implementation 231,000 persons should have been issued with certificates. We will have to wait and see how even the obligations under the pact are being fulfilled before we think of the balance number.

Indian Tamils are concentrated in the districts of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Matale, Badulla, Moneragala, Ratnapura and Kegalle. Colombo city has also a substantial number. In recent years there has been some migration to Vauniya and some other parts of the Eastern and Nothern province. A. J. Wilson noted that even during the 1970 elections the Indian Tamil workers could have had influence in some 20 constituencies.[8] This influence would grow significantly with the implementation of the agreement. Some of the political parties have shown clear recognition of this fact.

In this paper an attempt is made to trace some of the developments since 1931 that eventually led to the disenfranchisement of the Indian Tamils in 1948, the passing of the Citizenship Acts and the various agreements that were entered into between the two governments and also to examine the place of the Indian Tamils in the ethnic configuration of the country. Kodikara observes that "as a controversial political issue the Indo-Ceylon dispute goes back to the late 1920's and the 1930's and resulted from two factors; first the problems arising from the decision of the British government to introduce a new constitution in 1931. Second the problem arising from the depression of the early 1930's and the impact this had on Ceylonese attitudes in regard to Indian immigration.[9]

Two other factors also influenced the issue. The first of these being the geo-political factor. Writing about the views



of D. S. Senanayake, the first Prime Minister of Ceylon, Sir Ivor Jennings felt that "he was well aware of the dangers implicit in having nearly a population of 350 million people pressed outward and capable under wrong leadership of becoming atggressive."[10] Speaking in a similar vein John Kotelawela said. "The day Ceylon dispensed with Englishmen completely the island will go under India". Such sentiments had been expressed at different times in different contexts by prominent leaders of the island. Nehru himself characterised as "fantastic nonsense" the fear of some Ceylonese that India might invade or absorb Ceylon.[12] As early as 1948 the leader of the opposition Dr. N. M. Perera criticised this concept in the following words, "There is a feeling among sections of the government and the U. N. P. that we have to safeguard ourselves against India and that therefore it is necessary for us to lean upon Britain for the purpose. There is a feeling like that throughout the country among certain sections of the population. I say that this is political myopia of the worst type."[13] However this factor persisted and tended to influence discussions on citizenship problems.

The other factor was the complexes and phobias that prevailed regarding Sinhala-Tamil relations. An extremist view was that the Indian Tamil estate workers were a kind of Tamil fifth column, a strategically placed bridge-head in the centre of the island. They would join with the Tamils of the North and then together with the Tamils of South India to threaten the Sinhalese. Vincent Coelho a former Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka noted that "this complex was repeatedly in evidence during Indo-Ceylon negotiations on the status and rights of emigrant labour of Indian origin."[14]

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It is against such a background and in a period that was beset with economic crisis and when various socio political developments were taking place in the country that K. Natesa Iyer the pioneer plantation workers leader who made an entry into the plantations in 1925 joined A. E. Goonesinha's Labour Union (founded in 1923) and, was Vice-President

for a short time. But differences arose. Natesa Iyer was expelled from the Union in 1929 and Goonesinha's stance took an increasingly communal trend. It is interesting that these developments took place immediately after the Donoughmore recommendations in 1928.

Adult franchise and the prospect of political power through elections tended to give a new fillip to the Buddhist revivalist movement with its communal orientation. Sinhala merchant capital, felt its main opponents to be the traders and businessmen of other ethnic groups. They regarded these groups as an obstacle to their advance in the trade. The big Borah houses and other Indian-origin traders had come in for sharp criticism from the Buddhist revivalists. It is a matter of irony that these same Indian businessmen should have been made distinguished citizens by this very same class in later years.

Capitalists backed by Buddhist revivalism did not want any impediments in the way of achieving political power which they were eager to secure. To have extended adult franchise to all Indian Tamils would have meant, as the Sinhala leaders saw it, a dilution of the electoral strength of their supporters, particularly in the Kandyan areas.

It was never the thinking to totally deny franchise rights to all Indian Tamil workers. The demand was only to restrict it. Therefore when the Donoughmore commissioners' recommended that the "privilege of voting should be confined to those who have an abiding interest in the country or who may be regarded as permanently settled in the country"[15]. This was welcomed by the Sinhala leaders of the time. However there was disagreement as to whether 5 years residence qualification alone was enough for this purpose. In addition to such residence it was felt that a reasonable intention to settle in the island should also be ascertained. The Donoughmore proposals were amended to meet these objections. The qualifications stipulated by the (Elections) Order in Council 1931 and the manner of their



implementation had the effect of restricting the voting rights particularly of the workers.

The procedures for registration of voters were made more strict in 1939 and the number of voters was reduced from 225,000 in 1939 to 168,000 in 1943 a drop of 57,000. The idea was to restrict the voting rights especially that of the workers. While attempting to restrict franchise rights there was general agreement that the continued presence of the Indian Tamil estate workers was necessary -- a feeling that did not apply to the urban Indian migrants. When Dr. N. M. Perera introduced a motion in the State Council in 1937 asking that no further licenses be granted by the Minister of Labour, Industry and Commerce for estate labour immigration, the motion was rejected by 29 votes to 5 with 1 abstention, all the Sinhala ministers voting against it[16] The idea was to keep the estate workers but without franchise rights. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party, formed in 1935 made an early impact among plantation workers. The Bracegirdle episode, the Mooloya and Wewesse strikes made a great impact. This growth of radicalism and a Marxist ideology was also accompanied by a growth of communalism. Perhaps one of the reasons for the communalism of A. E. Goonesinha was that he was losing large sections of his membership particularly the non-Sinhala groups to the Marxist trade unions. A. E. Goonesinha the pioneer flamboyant labour leader, took refuge in communalism when his union eroded and large sections of workers sought the membership of his rivals the Marxists in the 1930's soon after communal trends became further institutionalised through the formation of the Sinhala Mahajana Sabha in 1937. Explaining the raison d'etre of the new party at its 1939 sessions Bandaranaike, its founder said :

> "We saw differences amongst our people, caste distinctions up-country and low-country distinctions and various others - and we therefore felt that we should achieve unity which is the goal of us all. Surely the best method was to start from the low rung: firstly unity among the Sinhalese and secondly uniting the Sinhalese to work for the higher unity of all communities."

The approach was to be a given a new dimension with the formation of the SLFP and later the MEP in 1956.

When Ceylon was hit by the depression the demand for Ceylonisation increased. In 1936 Indians constituted 26% of the labour force in all government departments combined[17] in 1939 it dropped to 19%.[18] It continued to decrease over the years. In 1939 at the instance of the Minister of Communications and Works, J. L. Kotalawela 2,500 Indian Origin persons were retired from Government Service. The Indian National Congress which was appraised of the developments decided to send an emissary to the island. It was first decided that Sarojini Naidu should go to Ceylon but later due to her indisposition Jawahralal Nehru himself came here. The Ceylon Indian Congress was formed in 1939 by the merger of a number of organisations such as the Central Indian Association, Seva Sangam etc.

Among the 14 members who signed the original declaration announcing the formation of the Ceylon Indian Congress were H. M. Desai, S. Rauf, Basha, M. U. Khan, I. X. Pereira, F. M. Ghany, S. R. M. Valliappa Chettiar, C. K. Kunchiraman besides Perisunderam, S. P. Vythilingam and others. It will be noted that the urban and non-estate Indian groups were more than amply represented in the committee. The organisation was considered to be a representative body of all sections of "Ceylon Indians". While the total independence of Sri Lanka and India was declared to be one of its main objectives, it was stated that "the Organisation was formed in order to safeguard the interests of the "Ceylon Indians". To achieve this purpose it was thought essential to have a single Central organisation".[19]

In 1941 after the inaugural session of the CIC its trade union wing the Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union[20] was formed and plantation workers began to join in large numbers. Soon the plantation worker interests became predominant and others gradually dropped out of the organisation. With this development the character of the CIC completely changed and it



became primarily a worker organisation and representative of the estate Indian Tamils. The Ceylon Indian Congress was renamed "Ceylon Democratic Congress" in 1953 and after a split in 1957 the Ceylon Democratic Congress gradually became defunct. Today the Ceylon Workers Congress is the most powerful organisation of plantation workers. It is also considered to be the representative organisation of Indian Tamils of the plantations with S. Thondaman being the accepted leader. When Nehru visited Ceylon in 1939 he held talks with various Ceylonese leaders on immediate and long term problems of the Indian settlers in the country. Mahatma Gandhi writing in the paper "Harijan" expressed the hope that as a result of Nehru's discussions with the Ceylon leaders a satisfactory solution will be found for the problems of the "Ceylon Indians".[21] In 1940 an entirely informal and exploratory conference was held between the governments of India and Ceylon with a view to ensure a satisfactory basis for formal negotiations at a later date on all problems of common interest which required adjustment. During this conference the Ceylon delegation expressed its readiness "to recognise claims to full rights and privileges of citizenship of those Indians who have no connection with India and have a genuine and abiding interest in Ceylon."[22]

The proposals advanced by the Ceylon delegation contemplated the division of Indians in Ceylon into three categories –

(1) Persons of Indian origin who possessed a Ceylon domicile of origin who could be entitled to all privileges and rights as Ceylon citizens.

(2) Persons of Indian origin who possess a Ceylon domicile of choice.

(3) Undomiciled Indian residents (those with less than 5 years residence) would be entitled to earn their living but would have no citizenship rights.

The Indian delegation suggested that citizenship should be conferred on those with (a) 5 years residence (b) permanent

interest in Ceylon both tests to be satisfied by a set of easily ascertainable facts. Others not qualified for citizenship were to be allowed to continue in their lawful vocations without discrimination. In order to resolve differences a further conference was held in 1941. Despite previous divergences in views the conference arrived at certain conclusions.

In regard to franchise and status the following conclusions were reached:

**Franchise**

It was agreed that those Indians who could not claim domicile of origin or of choice[23] or a literacy and property qualification could vote only if they possessed a certificate of permanent settlement which would be granted on the following conditions –

(a) declaration that the applicant has an intention of remaining in Ceylon indefinitely.

(b) proof of means of livelihood.

(c) if married, proof that wife and minor children if any were ordinarily residing with the applicant.

(d) possession of a qualification of residence in Ceylon of 7 years for married and 10 years for unmarried persons, the period of residence to be completed within 4 years from the date of agreement provided that continuous absence of more than one year prior application constitutes a break in the qualifying period of residence.

**Status**

It was agreed that Indians who had satisfied tests for proving a permanent interest in Ceylon should have equal rights with the permanent population. As the joint report was generally an endorsement of the view of the Ceylon Delegation it was urged that the report be accepted by the Ceylonese Board of Ministers. There was disagreement on the Indian side and India did not ratify the report. In 1943 the report was repudiated by India. It has been since



observed that as a result of this decision made by India "an opportunity for agreement was allowed to pass that time.[24]

That franchise and equal rights should be given to people of Indian origin who had become permanently settled in the island was clearly accepted but as to what was the number of persons who were permanently settled there was some speculation. Underlying the various discussions one could discern a desire to give rights to a limited number – the concept of so called absorbable maximum. In 1928 the Donoughmore Commissioners estimated that 40–50 per cent of the Indian workers had become permanently settled in the island[25]. The Jackson report of 1938 estimated permanent settlement to be at 60%[26]. The Planters Association of Ceylon estimated that 70–80 per cent of Indian labour was permanently settled in the island in 1936[27]. The Soulbury Report estimates that the degree of permanent settlement was in the region of 80%. Probably D. S. Senanayake had an entirely different idea,

It was significant that on Nov. 8, 1945 D. S. Senanayake stated that franchise would be restricted to those deemed to be citizens of the country and that the plantation workers would be excluded.[28] During the 1947 elections held under the Soulbury Constitution the organisation of the Indian Tamil plantation workers won seven seats. Where the Ceylon Indian Congress did not field its own candidate the workers voted for the left and opposition candidates. Wriggins estimated that Indian Tamil workers favourably influenced the election of 7 to 9 left-wing Sinhala leaders in other electorates[29]. A. J. Wilson estimates that the Indian Tamil voters influenced the elections in about 20 electorates[30]. In the 1947 House of Representatives there were 20 Left members and 41 UNP members. After disenfranchisement of plantation workers in the 1952 elections Left strength was reduced to 13 and the UNP increased its members to 54. Mr. S. P. Vythilingam a member of 1931 and 1936 State Councils and an appointed member between 1952–1956 and who also had close acquaintance with the Senanayakes was of the opinion that if the Ceylon Indian

Congress had supported the UNP in the 1947 general elections and generally co-operated with the UNP, the Citizenship Acts would have been less vigorous and implementation much more flexible.[31]

The Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949 were preceded by a conference between D. S. Senanayake and Nehru in New Delhi. However there was divergence of opinion irrespective of views expressed by Nehru. D. S. Senanayake introduced the Citizenship Acts on a unilateral basis without concurrence from India on a number of matters. Speaking of the Ceylon Citizenship Act, Pieter Keuneman said in Parliament that even Dudley Senanayake, who was later to become the Prime Minister of Ceylon, could not comply with the clauses because according to his own admission in the House of Representative he could not trace his father's birth certificate. The position of Pieter Keuneman was also the same because the practice of registration of birth was not there when his father was born.[32]

The Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Citizenship Act of 1949 were severely condemned by the LSSP, CP, CIC, TC and some independents. There was general agreement among all these parties that–

(1) The two Citizenship Acts were discriminatory.

(2) The Acts would result in depriving a large number who already had citizenship status of their citizenship.

(3) The provisions of the Acts were too restrictive.

(4) There was an invidious distinction that was being made between citizens by descent and those by registration.

(5) The requirements under the Indian and Pakistani Citizenship Act was too complex and involved too much expense for the poor estate worker.

237,000 applications covering around 824,000 persons were made under the Indian and Pakistani Citizenship Act. If the provisions of the Act were rigorous and the procedures complex



the implementation was even more rigorous and inflexible. Applications were rejected on the most flimsy grounds. The rejections were so arbitrary that one felt that the entire exercise was a meaningless one. To crown it all there came to light an administrative circular in which Deputy Commissioners who were semi-judicial officers were asked to reject applications on the basis of a percentage. The implementation of the Act turned out to be farce and the problem remained unsolved.

It has been stated that D. S. Senanayake had the intention of giving citizenship to only 50,006 persons. When it was found that by a proper implementation of the Act the total number admitted to citizenship would far exceed 50,000 attempts were made to thwart the Act itself. The rejection of a large number of applications on such a scale was only creating a new problem. Realising this position the occasion of the Commonwealth Meeting was made use of, by Dudley Senanayake the Prime Minister to discuss the matter with Nehru. A more realistic approach to the problem was taken during these discussions.

The proposals made by Dudley Senanayake were that –

(a) 400,000 Indian residents in Ceylon were expected to be registered under the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1949.[33]

(b) An additional number of 250,000 persons would be granted Permanent Residence Permits whose future would be reviewed after 10 years and if during this time any of them wanted to go to India, Government of India would not raise any objection.

(c) The permissible number of persons to be granted citizenship by registration and Permanent Residence permits was in no case to exceed 650,000.

(d) The balance of 300,000 were to be accepted as Indian citizens and repatriated to India compulsorily.

Nehru did not agree with the principle of compulsory repatriation but otherwise the proposals seemed to be a reasonable basis of arriving at a solution.

The essence of the Nehru-Kotelawela proposals of January 1954 were –

(1) Registration of citizens under the Indian and Pakistani Citizenship would be completed in two years.

(2) Seperate electoral register for a period of 10 years. It was stated that this was because the new citizens did not know the language of the area.

(3) Inducements were to be offered to those who were not registered as Ceylon Citizens to apply for Indian citizenship.

The Kotelawela-Nehru proposals were doomed to failure. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike said :

"The best course would be to abrogate (the 1954 agreement) by friendly discussion, to go on with registering of Indians who have applied for our citizenship and when that task is complete to take up the question of those who have failed to obtain our citizenship with India on a fresh basis"[34].

This advice was to be taken up by Mrs. Bandaranaike much later in 1964 after she became Prime Minister.

The Sirimavo-Shastri agreement was undoubtedly based upon a fresh approach. Both Prime Ministers had agreed that it was necessary to "seek a fresh settlement of the problem".

However in November 1964 even before implementation was worked out Mrs. Bandaranaike announced that those Indian origin persons granted citizenship would be placed on a separate electoral register. When objections were raised she said that this was not a part of the Delhi agreement and that this was a matter entirely for the Ceylon Parliament. The Ceylon High Commission in Delhi went to the extent of arguing that separate electorates would help to "vastly promote and accelerate assimilation into the surrounding society"[35]. The proposal for separate electorates was against the United Nations charter and the Declaration of Human Rights. It appeared to be possible to fight racism internationally, to oppose apartheid in South Africa and introduce separate electorates for a nationality group in the country.



The proposals for separate registers were not implemented, The Sirimavo Bandaranaike government was defeated in 1965. In November, 1965 the then Minister of State J. R. Jayewardene annonnced in the House of Representatives that the government had no intention "at present" to put the voters of Indian origin on a separate register. The enabling legislation introduced by Dudley Senanayake which tied the grant of Sri Lankan citizenship to registration of Indian citizens and not to repatriation came in for severe criticism by Mrs. Bandaranaike. He was accused of having entered into a deal with Thondaman and of betraying the interests of the Sinhalese.

The separate electorate question was not brought up even after Mrs. Bandaranaike came to power in 1970 as head of a Coalition government. Among the factors that made her change the earlier position must be counted the strong objection from the government of India and the influence of her Left Wing allies. Around the time of the Land Reforms anti-Indian Tamil worker position was taken by a number of SLFP MPs. Workers were thrown out of estates and a pogrom was conducted on two estates in the Pussellawa area. Tension was also created in some other estate areas.

The communally based upheavals that had taken place in 1977 and 1981 were a shattering experience for the 'Indian Tamils.' A feeling of insecurity prevails to this day in certain areas. There has been an outward migration from plantation areas to the basically Tamil areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces which were considered to be more secure. The migration has brought about certain ethno-demographic changes which are bound to have considerable influence on inter ethnic relationships in the country.

The implementation of the 1964 agreement and the increase in the number of those with citizenship will undoubtedly influence the policies of political parties seeking to come to power through parliamentary elections.

It is against this background that the position of the Indian Tamils as an identity group and their future position in the

country has to be considered. Sri Lanka is a poly-ethnic society with identity formations along several lines. All Tamils including the Tamils of South India and Tamils in other parts of the world form a single ethnic community. This ethnicity is derived from a number of factors—language, religion, culture, traditions and to some extent race. In the same manner, the Sinhalese wherever they may live, belong to the same ethnic community. A common identity however does not prevent sections of the ethnic community from forming separate sub-ethnic identities.

Sri Lanka Tamils originating from the Northern and Eastern Provinces have a long history, common traditions, a strong consciousness of belonging to one community, a with territorial home of which gives them the characteristic of a well-developed nationality.

The bonds of identity that exists between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sri Lankan Indian Tamil's should be viewed together with the distinction and the differences that exists between these two kindred peoples. A proper understanding of the dynamics and character of this relationship, will be vital for the formulation of solutions and establishing that particular pattern of inter-ethnic relationships that will generate harmony and understanding.

The Indian Tamil community is now composed mainly of persons of plantation origin. It is estimated that about 70% of the Indian Tamils are estate workers. However as an ethnic identity formation both workers and non-workers form a single group. While 19th century migrants from India or China to other parts of the world, have been absorbed and become citizens of the countries to which they migrated, the situation with regard to Sri Lanka is somewhat different. One of the reasons for this may be the basic ethnic pattern of the country with its large concentration of Sri Lankan Tamils in the North and East of Sri Lanka. This basic ethnic pattern has added a great deal of complexity to the problems of the Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan 'Indian Tamil' has a self consciousness of his identity as different from that of the Sri Lankan Tamil.



Common historical experience, geographical location, and common disabilities suffered by them have in course of time strengthened and stabilised this identity consciousness. The fact of living within the same state, speaking the same language and having an essentially common culture does not in anyway conflict with the separate identities of the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sri Lankan Indian Tamils, The rights and status of the 'Indian Tamils' will have to be worked out in accordance with the specific problems faced by them and within the inter-ethnic situation in which they are living. The problems of the Sri Lankan Tamils have their own specific characteristics.

The complex problem of ensuring equality to the different groups in our poly-ethnic society will depend on a deeper and clearer understanding of the problems of the different sections of our society. Elsewhere in the world we have seen that ethnic differences can be over emphasised to a point of cleavage, conflict and even conflagration. The Sri Lankan consciousness which includes the recognition of the poly-ethnic nature of our society and yet transcends these differences can be strengthened only by a due recognition of the rights and status of the different ethnic groups and ensuring mutual equality and mutual respect among them.

## Notes

1. Labour Conditions in Ceylon, Mauritius and Malaysia Report by Major A. J. Orde Browne. Cmd. 1423 Page 11-quoted by S. O. Kodikara in '*Indo-Ceylon Relations since Independence*', Page. 6.
2. Article by S. M. Krishnan in Aththa, October 1974.
3. Victoria, Roche & Motha are some well known business names from the Bharatha Community.
4. Kodikara, Page 7.
5. Kodikara, Page 7.
6. Howard W. Wriggins *Dilemmas of a New Nation* (Princeton, 1960) p. 218.
7. Kodikara, Page 143.

8. A. J. Wilson. *Electoral Politics in an Emergent State*, Page 100.

9. Kodikara, Page 74.

10. Ivor Jennings "Crown and Commonwealth in Asia" International Affairs (London) Vol. 32 No. 2. April 1966. Page 138. Quoted by Lalit Kumar in India and Sri Lanka (Sirimavo – Shastri Pact) Chetana Publications.

11. The Times (London) 26 May 1955. Quoted by Lalit Kumar.

12. The Hindu 20 May 1957. Quoted by Kodikara, p. 42.

13. House of Representatives Debates (19. 8. 1948) Vol, 4. Col. 1696. Quoted by Kodikara page 43.

14. Vincent Coelho, *Across Palk Straits*, Page 155.

15. Donoughmore Report, Cmd. 3131, p, 82.

16. State Council debate 1937. Vol. 2 pp. 2365-2422. Quoted by Kodikara.

17. Jackson Report. Page 15.

18. Report of the retirement officers on the scheme for the retirement of non-Ceylonese daily paid workers in Govt. employment: Sessional paper 1939. Quoted by Kodikara.

19. From the declaration issued forming the Ceylon Indian Congress on 25th July 1939.

20. It was later named Ceylon Workers Congress.

21. Article in Harijan July 1939. Reported in 'Virakesari' July, 1939.

22. Indo–Ceylon Relations Exploratory Conference. Report of the Ceylon delegation. Sessional paper 8 of 1941.

23. Domicile of choice was understood by the Ceylon delegation to mean a domicile of choice after 5 years of residence to the satisfaction of a court according to the rules of English Law regarding the acquisition of domicile of choice.

24. Lalit Kumar. Page 29.



25. Report of the Special Commission on Constitution. Cmd. 3331. Page 96.

26. Jackson Report 1938. Page 26.

27. Ibid.

28. E. F. C. Ludowyk, *The Modern History of Ceylon* (London 1956) page 219.

29. Wriggins, Page 203. Also Ivor Jennings "The Ceylon General Election of 1947" University of Ceylon Review pp. 133–145 (Colombo).

30. A. J. Wilson. *Electoral Politics in an Emergent State*, pp. 49–50.

31. Personal discussion.

32. Ceylon PDHB. Vol. 41, 1961. Col. 19229–30. Quoted by Lalit Kumar.

33. Presumably the idea was that the Act could be so implemented as to reach this figure.

34. Policy statement of Sri Lanka Freedom Party published in Free Lanka. Feb. 16, 1955.

35. Statement by the First Secretary of the Ceylon High Commission in New Delhi Mr. D. Samarasekera. Quoted by Lalit Kumar Page 59.

# University Admission and the National Question

**Sunil Bastian**

The higher educational scene in Sri Lanka of the seventies has seen a number of schemes and formulae for the admission of students to the university. In 1970, the United Front government then in power gave some heed to the allegation that there was too great a proportion of Tamil stream students who had qualified to enter the science faculties (especially to Medicine and Engineering) and arbitrarily set up a scheme of marks, where the minimum entry requirements for a Tamil medium student were higher than for a Sinhala medium student. Since that time, there have been a quick succession of admission schemes, which can be arranged in the following chronological order :-

1973 - Medium wise standardisation.

1974 - Medium wise standardisation plus a district quota system with modifications.

1975 - Medium wise standardisation plus a district quota system.

1976 } Admissions based on the following formula : 70 %
1977 } on raw marks ; 30% on a district basis of which 15% was reserved for ' backward ' districts ;

1978 - On raw marks ; But those who would have qualified if standardisation had been in effect were also taken in by expanding the number of places :

1979 - Admissions based on the following formula : 30 % on an all - island merit basis ; 55 % on a district basis and 15 % for the backward districts - all on raw marks.

When introducing the admission formula for 1979, the Ministry of Higher Education emphasised the fact that the



formula would apply only for that particular year. This means a satisfactory and permanent method of university admissions has not been devised yet and it is possible to expect many similar changes in the future. So far the system of admission has not changed from this method adopted in 1978, But the newspapers of 8th July 1982 reporting a cabinet commission stated that the Government has decided to work out a quota system on an ethnic basis for admission to the universities.

The question of standardisation figured prominently in the formation of the Tamil United Liberation Front. The Vadukkodai resolutions adopted at the formation of the T. U. L. F. gives an important place to the question of standardisation and university admission. It had become a key issue of communal agitation for Sinhala chauvinists and also a topic of much prominence in the mass media.

Most of the discussions on this issue centre around the percentage formulae and the possible results of the application of these formulae for university admissions. *Little attention had been given to the more important historical aspects of the problem. For example, such questions as 'Why did admission formulae begin to appear only in the seventies?'* or 'How is it that of all the problems arising out of the national question, so much agitation has been possible around this particular issue, although as we shall show below, in reality it is relevant only to a tiny minority who get a chance to come up to Grade 12 level?' or 'Whose interests are served by all this agitation around the question of university admissions?' had received very little attention in these discussions.

In order to answer such questions, we shall have to go into a historical analysis of the education system and also to understand It in relation to the total socio - economic system of our society. in the final analysis it will be necessary to recognise the class nature of our education system. What follows is an attempt to develop *a framework* for this type of analysis.

* * *

It is well known that the foundation for the formal education system of Sri Lanka was laid down during the

colonial period and that it was designed to serve the needs of our colonial 'masters.' The education system played a big role not only in producing the personnel to man the colonial administrative structure, but also in shaping the relations between the two major communities of this country and helping effectively in furthering the colonial aim of 'divide and rule'. The manner in which educational facilities were distributed and the way it functioned to facilitate social mobility in different communities in our society had a great deal to do with aggravating the antagonistic relations between the two major communities of Sri Lanka.

In the independence struggle headed by the local elite, representatives of both the Sinhala bourgeoisie and the Tamil bourgeoisie came together. Although they were from two communities, their common interests as a class, their Western-oriented upbringings and education and the presence of a common enemy made it possible for them to stand together and come into an agreement with the colonial powers about the transfer of political power into their hands. But very soon it was apparent that in the competition between different sections of the bourgeoisie, they would make use of the communal differences that existed in society for their own benefit. The bourgeosie in this process also managed to divide the oppressed working classes and the peasants on a communal basis effectively.

*The education system is a key instrument that the bourgeoisie uses to obtain their own ends.* The revival of Sinhala nationalism in the nineteenth century which can be associated with the emergence of a Sinhala merchant capitalist class, is clearly marked by their incursion into the field of education. In 1880, the Buddhist Theosophical Society was formed under the leadership of Col. Henry Steele Olcott. An Educational Fund was launched in 1881, and soon schools *on the model of missionary schools* were set up in different parts of the island: Ananda College in Colombo, Dharmaraja College in Kandy, Mahinda College in Galle, Vijaya College in Matale, Jinaraja College in Gampola and Anurudha College in Nawalapitiya were the first such schools to be established. It should be



noted that these schools did not resemble in any way the traditional 'pirivenas' or any other educationl institutions of our traditional society, although the revival of national culture was put forward as one of the main aims in this establishment. In actual fact these were institutions set up on the Western model, where the sons and daughters of the Sinhala bourgeoisie could be educated so that they could compete effectively with the others for lucrative places and positions in society. Almost at the same time, the Hindu revivalist movement began to set up their own schools to serve the same ends. A Hindu school was started by Arumuga Navalar in 1872 at Vannarponai and in Jaffna Hindu College was started in 1890.

Since independence the Sinhala bourgeoisie was able to take more effective steps in education for their own benefit making use of the state power which was in their hands. Taking over of the assisted schools in 1960 was the next step in this direction. The support for this measure came not only from the upper layers of the Sinhala bourgeoisie, but also from the middle layers, especially those from a rural background. The latter saw in this measure a chance to gain entry into the privileged Christian schools for their children or considered it to be a policy which would lead to a greater equalisation of educational opportunities and which would benefit them.

The take-over of schools was resisted by the Christian and Hindu bourgeoisie, and the *schools that were supported by the most powerful sections of the Christian and Hindu bourgeoisie were not taken over* by the government. The Sinhala-Buddhist power bloc on the other hand handed over their schools with very little resistance and sometimes willingly. It was obvious that their interests could not be jeopardised by handing over the schools to a state dominated by their own representatives.

The take-over on the one hand clearly served the interests of the Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie who could now make use of state funds and the state machinery to further the class interests through education. On the other hand, to some extent it opened the doors of the grant-in aid schools to a

broader section of the population and also had an equalising effect on the education system by bringing these schools also under the same administrative system as the other state schools. Another change in education policy which had such a dual impact (i. e. progressive as well as regressive) was the introduction of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction which also took place in the sixties. Both these measures which had a certain distributive and equalising effect on the education system, were brought about by the pressures of the rural middle classes.

Developments in the education system taking place under conditions of under-developed capitalism, brought out the contradictions within the system in the seventies. These contradictions reflect the inability of our education system to carry forward the 'equalising' process that began in the sixties. In the seventies, we witnessed a crisis in the education system, when the bourgeoisie begins to make use of the presence of two media of instruction in education to promote their own interests.

**Opportunity in Education**

Education had been recognised as the main path for social mobility for many of the social strata in our society. The introduction of 'free' education in the late forties, the setting up of a state-sponsored central school network and the switch-over to the mother tongue as the medium of instruction had been measures that brought education within the reach of a larger proportion of our population. A literacy rate of 78.5% in 1977 and a participation rate of 70% in the school system for the children of school-going age are results of these popular measures.

Although this is true of the general picture, a detailed analysis will show us the great disparities that still remain within our education system. The disparity of the facilities even within the state school system is glaring. The existence of a private school system adds to this disparity. A study of the social background of the pupils of privileged schools, whether they are private or state, will reveal the fact that the children of the



upper classes have a greater chance of getting into the schools with better facilities and thereby ensuring themselves of an education of better quality.

As the comparative drop-out figures clearly reveal, not only are the facilities in the schools attended by the poor of the cities, villages or the estates worse, but these children also have less chances of continuing education to a higher level without dropping out. The worsening of the situation with regard to drop-out rates in the recent past has been emphasised in a number of studies and discussions. [1]

There are more recent estimates of this pyramidical structure of our school system:-

(a) This pyramid is one 'in which 15% of those of age to begin school is 'left out' at the base, 50% 'drop out' on the way and another 20% is pushed out at Grade 10. At the apex approximately only 1% of 20–24 age group receive a university education. (Swarna Jayaweera, Demand for University Education, Report in University Education, National Science Council, 1980.

(b) One of our estimates based on figures given by Swarna Jayaweera in Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences Vol. 2 No. 2 and in a UNESCO Report (1978), entitled "Development of Education in Asia and Oceania: Statistical trends and projections 1960–1985, showed that by the time the student reaches grade V only 45% are in schools. Around 15% reach grade XII and around 1% reach the University, (Sunil Bastian, Injustice in Education and the School Model: Logos. Vol. 21 No. 2 June 1982)

On the average, for the whole island, if a cohort of 100 enter Grade 1, around 60 remain by the time the cohort reaches Grade 5, 50 by Grade 8 and 35 go on up to Grade 10 when 'O' Levels are taken. On an average, around pupils of the cohort of 100 succeed in reaching Grade 12 when they sit for the 'A' Level examination to gain entrance into the university. The number that manages to enter the university is around 0.9–1%**. If

these are the average figures for the whole island, the picture for an under-privileged community in a remote village, slum or estate will be worse. *The chances that children of these social backgrounds have of getting into the university are extremely remote.* This is specially true when we consider much sought-after faculties like medicine or engineering. A study done on the social background of university entrants for the year 1967 revealed that in the Medical and Engineering Faculties 73% of the entrants were from private or privileged state schools, which the researcher calls 'other' government schools. 184 of the entrants to these faculties were non-school candidates. This 18% will also include a sizeable proportion who had been in these schools before. Therefore the predominance of the upper social layers in these faculties is very evident.

A similar conclusion had been reached in a more recent survey done by the Ministry of Education.[2] Studying the entrants of 1976 in relation to the occupational status of the Parent/Guardian, the study concludes that 'the distribution of entrants according to occupational status of parent/guardian shows a gross under-representation of manual workers and subsistence farmers who constitute 82.4% of the employed population. Thus, 39.2% of the entrants had parents who were in occupational categories comprising manual workers, minor employees and subsistence farmers; 27.8% of the entrants came from families whose bread-winners worked as clerical hands and sales workers: 4.8% of the children hailed from homes of executive and administrative workers: 19.7% were children of professional workers, parents of 3.4% of the entrants were unemployed. The entrants when viewed from the standpoint of chosen areas of studies fall into positions which clearly reflect socio-occupational stratification. Thus, parents of 36.5% of the science entrants were teachers: together with professional workers, they accounted for 47% of the science entrants. *In contrast, only 13.6% of the science entrants came from homes whose income-earners worked as manual workers or subsistence farmers.* The socio-occupational stratification has resulted in a vicious circle which through cause and effect relations favour the children of teachers and other professionals. Therefore, the



nine year period between these two studies does not seem to have brought about any significant changes.

All these facts would seem to indicate that the beneficiaries of our education system had been the upper and middle layers of our society. Our 'free' education is in fact a device by which the resources of the country were chanelled for the benefit of these privileged sections of our society. By accepting the principle of 'free' education for all and by having along with it an education system with a structure ensuring the benefits of it to the privileged classes, our so-called welfare system in fact perpetuated the class system in education too. This also means that any crisis in the education system will be felt most acutely by those sections of society who in reality have better chances of gaining access to it.

It is very important to consider the question of university admission with this background in mind. The myth of free education tends to paint a very rosy picture with regard to educational opportunities. Only a small minority of the school-going population manages to reach up to grade 12 and sit for 'A' levels and then proceed to higher education. Naturally, this minority, whose interests are affected when problems arise in the sphere of higher education, will be in the forefront of agitation.

## Problems in the Admission to the Universities

Although a relatively small percentage of students reach Grade 12, only a small percentage of those sitting for the 'A' level examination can enter the University. In addition this percentage had been declining sharply over the years despite the fact that in the 1960's the number of places in the Universities was expanded by opening new Campuses.

**Percentages of applicants admitted to the Universities**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1948 | 22.4 | 1958 | 28.0 | 1972 | 10.8 |
| 1949 | 24.0 | 1959 | 30.0 | 1974 | 11.2 |
| 1950 | 30.3 | 1960 | 34.3 | 1975 | 8.4 |
| 1951 | 28.1 | 1961 | 37.0 | 1976 | 7.8 |
| 1952 | 25.6 | 1962 | 21.4 | 1977 | 5.9 |
| 1953 | 24.1 | 1963 | 22.6 | 1978 | 6.7 |
| 1954 | 29.5 | 1964 | 20.6 | 1979 | 6.4 |
| 1955 | 31.3 | 1965 | 20.3 | | |
| 1956 | 35.1 | 1966 | 11.6 | | |
| 1957 | 33.4 | 1970 | 10.9 | | |

(This table has been compiled by the data given by Dr. Swarna Jayaweera in her article Demand for University Education in Seminar Report on University Education-National Science Council 1980).

The non-expansion of our higher education system is a part of a wider phenomenon of the crisis in our entire socio-economic system. This crisis makes it difficult to maintain even the meagre benefits that people received through the so-called welfare system. We spend roughly around 4 to 5% of our GNP on our education system. But a larger proportion of this is used to maintain and run the structures already built up rather than for new development. The amount available for new investment is roughly only one-eighteenth of the funds required to maintain the existing system, which again in fact means spending the bulk of available funds to run the privileged parts of the system. The discriminatory structure of education automatically allocates most of the money spent on the system to the already privileged parts of the educational system.

The official response to this growing crisis of education had been to increase arbitrarily the qualifications needed to enter the University and to devise various admission formulae which would ensure the position of certain sections of our society in the sphere of higher education.

**Crisis in higher education and 'standardisation' –**

When Sri Lanka chose the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in higher education in the late sixties, some



anticipated that new communal tensions would come up around the medium of instrutcion. What should be taken into account is the specific way in which and the specific time at which this problem came up. *In the first place* although allegations about over-marking, prior leaking of question papers etc. were heard even in the early sixties, this became a problem forcing the government to take specific action only at the beginning of the seventies, when, as we have shown above, the competition for the university places was becoming acute enough for it to be a problem for the ruling bourgeoisie. *Secondly*, the introduction of standardisation began when the competition for the much sought-after science faculties (specially medicine and engineering) was becoming acute. The humanities had been taught in the mother tongue for many years now. But there had not been any question about standardisation around them all these years, although the competition for these faculties in numerical terms had been high, if we take into account the number seeking entrance and the number securing places. But these were not fields that the majority of the bourgeoisie went after. They were more concerned with those specialities which can ensure them a secure place on the social ladder. It was when the places for these faculties became difficult in the seventies, that various schemes of standardisation came into being. Although the first batch to do science in the mother tongue entered the university in 1968, in fact more of the well publicised allegation about overmarking had been regarding subjects in the science stream.

C. R. de Silva in an earlier study on the impact of the new admission schemes had concluded the following: 'Ethnically there is little doubt that the major blow fell on the Sri Lanka Tamils. The Tamil share of engineering admissions for instance fell from 24.4% in 1973 (standardisation only) to 16.3% in 1974 and is likely to fall to 13.2% in 1975 if the district quota system is applied without modifications (it really fell to 14.2). The parallel figures for medicine would be 36.9 in 1973, 25.9% in 1974 and 20% (estimate) in 1975. (In 1975 it really fell to 17.4%).[3] What graphical illustrations show us is how the increase or

decrease of the Sinhala admissions has direct and negative correlation with the increase or decrease of Tamil admissions. A continuous reduction of the percentage of Tamil admissions with a corresponding increase in the Sinhala admissions had taken place from the year 1973, when media-wise standardisation was introduced, until 1975 when the formula was a combination of media-wise standardisation and district quotas. The changes in the formula in 1976 had improved the level of Tamil admission.

These various admission schema may have altered the number of entrants in some districts and some of the so-called backward districts may have benefitted. But it is very unlikely that this would have led to a marked change in the social composition of university admissions. As has been pointed out repeatedly, very few in the so-called backward areas manage to come up to Grade 12 so that they may sit for the 'A' Levels. A large proportion of those who do, come from families with a certain social standing. They would definitely be at an advantage because of the district quota system. On the other hand, this system is disadvantageous to students from districts like Colombo and Jaffna, which are classified as 'developed' districts. But it is precisely from these districts that you will find students from relatively lower social backgrounds trying to gain entrance to the university. The urbanisation of these areas, the spread of education in terms of number of schools available and many other factors make it possible for these students to pursue education up to Grade 12 level. But the district system works to their disadvantage.

In contrast to the admissions to the Science faculties changes in the methods of admission have not affected the ethnic composition of the admission to the Arts-oriented faculties. Following are the percentages for these faculties for the same years:

| | 69/'70 | '70/'71 | '71/72 | '73 | '74 | '75 | '76 | '77 | '78 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sinhala | 89.1 | 89.7 | 92.7 | 91.8 | 86.0 | 85.6 | 86.3 | 85.8 | 83.3 |
| Tamil | 6.9 | 7.0 | 4.7 | 5.9 | 10.0 | 10.1 | 8.6 | 9.2 | 15.3 |



Therefore, various admission formulae that had appeared in the seventies in our higher education system had been devices by which the Sinhala bourgeoisie had secured the positions in the most coveted faculties for their children.

In reality, the classes who benefit from these admissions formulae constitute a tiny minority of our population. But the power wielded by these groups in our society is so high that they are able to make a national issue out of it. Their control over the mass media is the key factor in this. Thus 'standardisation' becomes a key issue for a political programme of one party in one community and also a rallying point for much agitation in the other community. With the help of the media the bourgeoisie is able to drag along with it a large section of the population on the basis of this issue - the sections of the masses, whose sons and daughters have a very slim chance of getting into the universities within this system. They are given to understand that 'standardisation' is the key problem in our education. The real crisis of the socio-economic system of Sri Lanka and its impact on education is successfully kept out of the limelight.

## Notes

* Comparative data for drop-out rates in the whole island for a number of years is given below.

| | Gr. 1 | Gr. 2 | Gr. 3 | Gr. 4 | Gr. 5 | Gr. 6 | Gr. 7 | Gr. 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1972 | — | 5.3 | 5.3 | 6.4 | 7.3 | 9.3 | 4.7 | 8.4 |
| 1973 | 3.9 | 4.3 | 9.81 | 0.9 | 13.2 | 13.5 | 11.8 | 14.1 |
| 1975 | 2.2 | 5.2 | 11.2 | 11.2 | 12 4 | 12.4 | 12.0 | 12.0 |
| 1976 | 6.8 | 2.3 | 5.5 | 7.4 | 10.2 | 7.5 | 6.3 | 13.9 |

Most of the data on drop-out rates for the whole Island do not show any identifiable trend over the past few years. Some of this data, which is usually collected by sending out questionnaires from a centralised statistical unit, have been questioned on their ability to reflect the actual situation. If data is collected on the basis of entries in the register, it will

not reflect how a pupil actually attends school in the course of the year. There it is possible to talk of a 'hidden drop-out rate' which will make the picture given by the existing statistics worse. Studies limited to a more localised area will be able to give us a better picture of the actual drop-out rates. The data from one such study done by Dr. Kariyawasam has been quoted above. Many of these studies have pointed out the alarming situation that exists in this country with regard to the drop-out rates.


1. Uswatte - Aratchchy G. - 'From Highway to Blind Alley' a note on Youth & Higher Education. Marga Vol. 1 No. 3, 1972.

2. University Admissions: A Report on a study concerning background characteristics of students selected for admission to the university in 1976 - Ministry of Education 1977.

3. C. R. De Silva - Weightage in University Admissions - Standardisation and District Quotas in Sri Lanka - Marga - Vol. 5 No. 2 1974.




# Ethnic Representation In The Higher State Services

Charles Abeysekera

## Introduction

The claim that minority ethnic groups were represented in the higher state services in proportions greater than warranted by their presence in the total population has often been advanced by certain representatives of the Sinhala majority. This was felt to be a result of the "divide and rule" principle of the British colonial power and an injustice to the major community; it was often urged after independence that measures should be taken to correct this imbalance.

This argument was advanced with great force at a time when the main avenues of accumulation and advancement in an under-developed economy open to the nationals of the country were through state employment. Though the development of private entrepreneurial activities has reduced the vigour of this argument, one finds it repeated even today. This paper is a preliminary effort to find out whether this argument has any validity today.

The first part of this paper is a summary of the findings of S. J. Tambiah and Tissa Fernando who looked at this problem in the period up to 1946. By that date recruitment to the higher state services was beginning to represent ethnic proportions more clearly, having earlier shown a distinct preponderance of minority elements.

The second part of this paper looks at the more recent picture. However, a great difficulty that faces the researcher in this period is the non-publication in recent times of documents such as the Civil List which were earlier published annually. An attempt has been made to gather as much information as possible from a variety of sources for this period. A general

conclusion would be that today, in most state services, minority ethnic groups are represented well below their population proportions.

This subject has acquired great importance again, in that the Government is reported to have appointed a committee to advise it on the desirability of arranging recruitment to the state services on an ethnic basis conforming to population proportions. The last part of this paper considers some broad implications of such a point of view; such a proposal would be retrograde both from the point of view of ethnic relations and efficiency of state management.

I

S. J. Tambiah has examined ethnic representations in Ceylon's higher administrative services from 1870 to 1946.

Having analysed the gradual process by which Ceylonese had replaced Europeans in these services, Tambiah went on to examine representation by various ethnic groups. "The nature of the inquiry now is to examine the representation of different ethnic groups to find out the pattern of ethnic representation during the years 1870 – 1946. Has any particular ethnic group dominated these services or contributed more than other groups in relation to its and their number in the total population; and what reasons could be suggested for such differential representation?"

To this end, Tambiah examined the ratio of various ethnic groups to representation in the administrative services at different points of time. His analysis "has shown that two of the minorities in Ceylon – the Burghers and the Ceylon Tamils – have contributed large numbers of personnel to the administrative services from 1870's to the 1920 s. Their contributions were always in excess of their members in the total population. Sometimes, specially in the case of Burghers, they have had the largest representation in services such as the Medical and Public Works departments."



**Medical Services**

| | *Total Local* | *Sinhalese* | *Tamil* | *Burgher* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1870 | 23 | 2 ( 8.7% ) | — | 21 (91.3%) |
| 1907 | 61 | 15 (24.6%) | 9 (14.7%) | 37 (60.7%) |
| 1925 | 188 | 80 (42.5%) | 58 (30.8%) | 50 (26.7%) |
| 1935 | 283 | 156 (55.1%) | 73 (25.8%) | 54 (19.1%) |
| 1946 | 345 | 205 (59.4%) | 115 (33.3%) | 25 ( 7.3% ) |

**Civil Service**

| | *Total Local* | *Sinhalese* | *Tamil* | *Burgher* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1870 | 7 | 7 | – | – |
| 1907 | 12 | 4 (33.3%) | 2 (16.7%) | 6 ( 50 % ) |
| 1925 | 39 | 17 (43.6%) | 8 (20.5%) | 14 (35.9%) |
| 1935 | 33 | 13 ( 40% ) | 11 (33.3%) | 9 (27.3%) |
| 1946 | 116 | 69 (59.5%) | 31 (26.7%) | 6 (13.8%) |

**Public Works Department**

| | *Total Local* | *Sinhalese* | *Tamil* | *Burgher* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1907 | 20 | 4 ( 20% ) | 2 ( 10% ) | 14 ( 70 % ) |
| 1925 | 28 | 6 (32.2%) | 2 ( 7.1%) | 17 (60.7%) |
| 1935 | 35 | 12 (34.3%) | 10 (28.6%) | 13 (37.1%) |
| 1946 | 67 | 35 (32.2%) | 17 (25.4%) | 15 (22.4%) |

**Judicial Services***

| | *Total Local* | *Sinhalese* | *Tamil* | *Burgher* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1935 | 30 | 8 (26.7%) | 10 (33.3%) | 12 ( 40% ) |
| 1946 | 53 | 26 (49.1%) | 14 (26.4%) | 14 (26.5%) |

* includes the Supreme and Distric Courts

In examining the reasons for this preponderance, Tambiah lays stress on English literacy and economic need: "The Burghers as a group showed the greatest literacy in English and were quick to avail themselves of Western education. They were not a landed group and in general did not interest themselves in agriculture. Their energies seem to have been directed towards administrative and professional employment. The Ceylon Tamils also found attractive avenues of employment

in the administrative services and the professions. Coming from the northern region of Ceylon where land was both scarce and infertile, they had no scope for large scale agricultural activity which was possible in the case of the Sinhalese – especially those in the low country."

He finds in the thirties a trend towards a gradual change in ethnic representation. "Proportionate to their numbers more persons of this group (the Sinhalese) enter the administrative services and professions such as medicine".

This trend continues till 1946 when he finds "the Sinhalese dominance in the administrative service is complete."

His general conclusion is as follows:

> "Thus the last year of the period examined here shows a large change in the ethnic composition of the country's administrative and social services. Until the twenties it could not even be said that the Sinhalese comprising two-thirds of the country's population contributed as much in absolute numbers as the Burghers and to a lesser extent the Ceylon Tamils. By 1946 they dominate the services, but not to the extent of their numbers in the total population, if we were to take this as a criterion."

As to the reasons behind this change, Tambiah hazards: "The reason for this change is not necessarily the greater interest of the Sinhalese in English education as compared with the other minority groups. This gain in English literacy would certainly have produced more English educated Sinhalese scholars than Burgher or Tamil. This gain however does not provide a total explanation of the dramatic change in the ethnic representations in the Administrative services. Perhaps the lack of further possibilities for the development of plantation agriculture, the division of family properties among succeeding generations thus making total dependence on landed income impossible in the case of many persons, the recruitment into the ranks of the elite of socially mobile people who were English educated but not landed in their origins and the



change in motivation or direction of interest among Sinhalese regarding occupational employment may be other factors in the change over".

Tissa Fernando has also studied some aspects of this problem. Though the main thrust of his article is to examine employment opportunities open to the Ceylonese in the medical and technical services, he finds that "the recruitment of Ceylonese did not necessarily mean the employment of Sinhalese, who composed the large majority of the native population. The tendency in the early phase of Ceylonisation was to recruit mainly Burghers". His figures are in the two tables below:

**Ethnic Distribution in the Medical Department as Percentages of Total Number of Ceylonese**

| | *1910* | *1920* | *1930* | *Percentage of Total Population at 1921 Census* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Burghers : | 51% | 32% | 19% | 0.7% |
| Sinhalese : | 21 | 31 | 47 | 67 |
| Tamils : | 28 | 36 | 33 | 11 |

**Ceylonese Officers in the Public Works Department**

| | *1910* | *1920* | *1930* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total : | 25 | 41 | 64 |
| Burghers : | 15 (60%) | 23 (56%) | 27 (42%) |
| Sinhalese ; | 6 | 11 | 18 |
| Tamils : | 4 | 7 | 19 |

He concludes: "Although by 1930 the Sinhalese had gained ground they had yet to obtain a proportion commensurate with their numerical strength ...The predominance of Burghers among Ceylonese recruits was a conspicuous feature of the entire public service. The Tamils also enjoyed more posts in proportion to population than did the majority community, the Sinhalese".

Considering the reasons for this situation, apart from the life style and political sympathies of the Burghers which were congenial to the British, Fernando lays greatest stress on English literacy.

> "The achievements of the Burghers emphasise the correlation between English education and superior employment for Ceylonese, so characteristic of Sri Lanka under the British".

The greater share of government employment enjoyed by the Tamils vis a-vis the Sinhalese was also mainly a function of English literacy. For, the Tamils "were ahead of the low-country Sinhalese in English literacy, though they were way behind them in literacy generally".

II

This paper will now examine representation by ethnic groups in the State services subsequent to the period examined by Tambiah and seek to ascertain whether the tendencies he perceived in 1946 towards a dominance of the public services by Sinhalese recruits, have continued. Such an examination is necessary in view of the popular conception that the minorities have had and continue to have a disproportionate share of state jobs; in fact this conception is one of many that go to feed the fires of Sinhala chauvinism.

The position as far as the Ceylon Civil Service is concerned is given in Table I below:

**Table I**

| | *1956* | | | *1962* | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Class I & II* | *Class III* | *Total* | *Class I & II* | *Class III* | *Total* |
| Sinhalese | 79(59.4) | 22(50) | 101(57.1) | 112(73.7) | 36(73.5) | 148(73.7) |
| Tamil | 34(25.6) | 18(41) | 52(29.4) | 26(17.1) | 10(20.4) | 36(17.9) |
| Muslim | 3(2.3) | 0 | 3(1.7) | 5(3.3) | 0 | 5(2.3) |
| Burgher | 17(12.8) | 4(11.9) | 21(11.8) | 9(3.9) | 3(6.1) | 12((6.0) |

(Percentages are given within brackets)



The number of Tamils occupying positions in Class III of the Civil Services also shows a declining trend. Class III is filled by promotions from the Clerical Services and this would appear to indicate that the proportions of Tamils in that service too has been declining.

The Civil Service was replaced by the Ceylon Administrative Service in the sixties and Table II below sets out the position in the Administrative Services at the end of December 1975, the date for which the latest listing is available.

**Table II**

| | *Total* | *Sinhalese* % | *Tamil* % | *Burgher* % | *Muslim* % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Class I | 89 | 68 (76.4) | 17 (19.1) | 1 (1.1) | 3 (3.3) |
| Class II | 278 | 226 (81.3) | 44 (15.8) | 4 (1.4) | 4 (1.4) |
| Class III | 898 | 735 (81.8) | 140 (15.6) | 5 (0.6) | 18 (2.0) |
| | 1265 | 1029 (81.3) | 201 (15.9) | 10 (0.8) | 25 (2.0) |

Class III comprises entrants from 1958 to 1975.

This shows that the share of the Sinhalese in this service has increased beyond its proportionate due. That this trend towards increasing domination will continue to accelerate is indicated by the fact that 81.8 % of Class III which includes recruitments between roughly 1958 up to 1975 is composed of Sinhalese.

A similar trend is shown in the judical services – this listing includes the Judges of the Supreme Court, District Judges and Magistrates.

**Table III**

| | *1956* | *1962* | *1973* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sinhalese | 38 (57.6) | 47 (60.3) | 66 (77.6) |
| Tamil | 20 (30.3) | 21 (26.9) | 16 (18.8) |
| Muslim | 4 (6.1) | 8 (10.2) | 3 (3.3) |
| Burgher | 4 (6.1) | 2 (2.6) | 0 |
| Total | 66 | 78 | 85 |

The position of the majority community has kept on improving until by 1973, they enjoy a proportion above their population ratio.

Up to 1946, the minority communities enjoyed a relatively strong position in the medical services. Table IV indicates their subsequent progress:

**Table IV**

| | *1956* | *1962* |
|---|---|---|
| Sinhalese | 432 (54.1) | 494 (53.4) |
| Tamil | 304 (38.1) | 380 (41.1) |
| Muslim | 12 (1.5) | 19 (2.1) |
| Burgher | 50 (6.3) | 32 (3.5) |
| Total | 798 | 925 |

It would appear from these figures that the advantage the minorities had in this area has been preserved.

In assessing employment in the engineering grades, Tambiah has taken account of only the Public Works Department. In examining the subsequent period, I have taken into consideration the engineers recruited into the three main organisations that employ engineers - Public Works Department, the Irrigation Department and the Department of Electrical undertakings. The relative position here is as indicated in Table V.

**Table V**

| | *1956* | *1962* |
|---|---|---|
| Sinhalese | 90 (42.1) | 136 (49.6) |
| Tamil | 102 (47.7) | 121 (44.2) |
| Muslim | 4 (1.9) | 4 (1.5) |
| Burgher | 18 (8.4) | 13 (4.7) |
| Total | 214 | 274 |

Popular fallacies however, seem to generalise on the basis of certain isolated examples where a minority is over-represented such as the Accountants Service.



**Table VI**

| | *1956* | *1962* |
|---|---|---|
| Sinhalese | 46 (35.8) | 66 (38.6) |
| Tamil | 77 (60.2) | 103 (60.2) |
| Muslim | 0 | 0 |
| Burgher | 5 (3.9) | 2 (1.2) |
| Total | 128 | 171 |

A few general conclusions can be drawn from these figures:

1. As far as the administrative services are concerned, the tendency towards the increasing dominance of Sinhalese is confirmed. They have a degree of representation in excess of their population ratio. *The minority groups have less than their due.*

2. This tendency is not evident in the professional fields, medicine, engineering, accountancy etc. at least upto the dates for which information has been secured.

3. The Burgher community has completely lost its position and is now relatively absent in the higher rungs of the State services.

4. Muslims are relatively under-represented.

III

Obviously this survey is incomplete. For the post- 1956 period, employment in the State Corporation sector should also be taken into account; the insistence on competence in the official language pushed a number of non-Sinhalese into this sector where this requirement was not rigorously applied. However, it does throw up a number of points which merit further study. I note them for further analysis:

(i) English literacy has been given by both Tambiah and Fernando as one of the reasons for the preponderance of the Tamil and Burgher communities in the State services up to 1946. With the introduction of free

education in the national media, the rise of a Sinhala-educated strata and the imposition of Sinhala as the official language in 1956, the whole position has changed. This is clearly amplified in the pattern of recruitment into the Administrative Service. This trend might be reversed if the use of Tamil as a national language in a decentralised administrative system was to be seriously implemented.

(ii) The educational system in Jaffna was geared not only to English but also to a science - based education. Facilities for science were more wide-spread in Jaffna than in many other districts. Does this early lead account for the continuing presence of Tamils in the technical departments?

(iii) Tambiah suggests that the lack of alternative economic opportunities, particularly in agriculture, pushed the Tamils towards employment in the State services, both in Sri Lanka and other regions such as Malaysia and that this was the main means of economic advancement open to them. He contrasts this with the opportunities open to Sinhalese, particularly of the low-country, in agriculture. One of the allegations made by the Sinhala revivalist leaders was that trade was dominated by minority groups. Did this include the Ceylon Tamils? We have a mental picture of pervasive small Tamil traders in all parts of the island. What we have now to seek out is whether the Tamil minority itself was denied opportunities in trade and other avenues by the established merchant houses of British and Indian origin.

(iv) Alongside of this propensity of the Tamils to seek state employment, one should look into the colonial recruitment policies. The opening up of higher posts in the administration to Ceylonese was a slow process. One of the arguments used in 1911 by a British Administrator, the Principal Civil Medical Officer was: "If a Ceylonese held the appointment, racial favouritism may be ascribed to him". In 1915 the Governor, in the face of working class unrest spoke



of the need to decrease the proportion of Sinhalese in the Railways. Did such a policy, stated or unstated, play a part in recruitment to the higher administrative services? In Burma, the British administrators extolled the diligence and hard-working qualities of the Indians and preferred them for subordinate state employment.

(v) Notwithstanding the decline in the absolute and relative numbers of Tamils in the public services, popular Sinhala consciousness still clings to the belief that these services are dominated by the Tamils. How has this belief been perpetuated? One must, in this connection, also look into those services with which the ordinary people come into normal contact - the post offices, clerks and other minor grades at district level.

(vi) Entry into the State services has been traditionally the preferred path of advancement and social mobility for the petty bourgeoisie; this section which forms the bulk of the intelligentsia and is articulate in the expression of its demands is therefore very conscious of competition in this area. Whether all snake-charmers, gypsies or astrologers are Tamil would not disturb the Sinhala petty-bourgeoisie but a feeling that minority groups restrict their chances of entry into the State services would agitate them; it is seen as denying opportunities not only for themselves but for their children as well. One might also ask why State emplyoment is chosen out of so many other forms of employment for analysis. It is important because -

(a) it is a prime source of economic benefit particularly in an under-developed society like Sri Lanka.

(b) the State's policies as reflected in its recruitment patterns can be an index to its attitude towards minority ethnic groups and

(c) the State's policies are likely to affect other sectors as well.

(vii) Given the declining access to employment in the State services, how does Tamil youth see their future? Are opportunities for economic advancement through agriculture, industry, jobs abroad etc. still relatively few? In such a situation, the restriction of State employment through official administrative action is a potent source of frustration and resentment.

(viii) Tambiah and Fernando both appear to assume that in a multi-ethnic society, representation of the various ethnic groups in the administrative services relative to their population ratios is a desirable thing; references to "over-representation" and "under-representation" imply this. I have myself adopted this basis for comparison purpose. But I would like to question this concept itself. Should access to state employment be in relation to population ratio? While special provision for previously under-privileged groups, like scheduled castes in India, might be justifiable, should a broader principle be adopted in a multi-ethnic society?

**References:**

Tambiah, S. J. - Ethnic Representation in Ceylon's Higher Administrative Services, 1870 - 1946. University of Ceylon Review 13 (2 and 3) April - July 1955.

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## POST-SCRIPT

I have referred in my article to the paucity of available information regarding recent recruitment to the State Services. Documents such as civil lists, seniority lists of various categories of State employees, etc. are not being published regularly. I have also encountered considerable difficulty in obtaining information about the composition of new services like those of engineers or scientists.



However, the Department of Census and Statistics has published in June 1983 a "Census of Public Sector Employment-1980." The data contained in this document sets out the position as at 1st July 1980.

It enumerates and classifies employment in two broad categories:

(i) Public Sector employees - including all employees in Ministries, departments and institutions which come under direct government administration; this would correspond to what I have described in my article as the State Services and

(ii) Corporation Sector employees - including all employees in the State owned Corporations and other statutory bodies - corresponding to what I have earlier called Public Sector employment.

Since the data achieved a 78% coverage of all institutions in these sectors, we could take it as an adequate representation of employment in these areas.

I reproduce below the tables that indicate the ethnic compositions of employees; I have worked out the percentages of each ethnic group in the population and the various categories which have been indicated in brackets:

Before commenting on these two tables, two facts need to be mentioned:

(i) The categorisation of jobs is on the basis of a standard occupational classification prepared in 1971 on the basis of an ILO classification. Thus the high proportion of employees in the category referred to as professionals, technical and related workers which might come as a surprise to many readers is because this category includes professions such as teachers.

(ii) The tables do not distinguish between the categories commonly referred to as Indian Tamil and Sri Lanka Tamil. Therefore, the population proportion to which reference is made should include both Sri Lankan

and Indian Tamils. The large mass of plantation workers are also not included in this survey. The employment figures given for the two plantation corporations indicate that only the managerial, supervisory and office grades have been enumerated.

This, however, may not vitiate the percentage figures.

The main conclusions to be drawn from these tables, to continue the line or argument in the main body of the paper, are as follows:

The historic reasons that determined a reduction of employment opportunities for the minorities have continued to affect the situation in the State Services. The minorities are now under-represented in State Service employment, both in total numbers and in regard to all occupational groups with one exception – agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry workers, fishermen and hunters. Even a scrutiny of the categories of employment in this group does not shed any light on this curious discrepancy.

It was earlier surmised that the proportions may vary in public sector employment because the requirement of an ability to work in Sinhala was not as important as in state services. This surmise has proved to be incorrect. The ethnic proportions of employment in the public sector closely parallel those of the state sector. The major Sinhala ethnic group is over-represented and the minority groups are under-represented in totality as well as in most of the occupational groups.

I would assume that this pattern of employment in the public sector is due to the probability that political patronage plays a greater part in employment in the public sector than it can in the state services. The exercise of political patronage has largely been in the hands of Sinhala politicians and its likely beneficiaries are members of this ethnic group.

This paper has been mainly discussing ethnic representation in the higher grades. The tendencies shown earlier in the



patterns of recruitment to these sectors have continued. Representation of the Sinhala ethnic group in the higher categories – occupational groups of professional, technical and related workers and administrative and managerial workers is beyond their population proportions and that of the minority ethnic groups is lower. Tamils and Moors are thus seriously under-represented.

However, if we take the numbers in these categories against total employment of each ethnic group, a different picture emerges. Of all the Sinhalese employed in the state services, 38.43% are in these two occupational groups; with regard to the Tamil ethnic group, the proportion is 41.33%. In the public sector, the proportions are 6.47 for the Sinhala group and 12.25 for the Tamil group. This indicates that proportionally more Tamils are in the higher occupational categories. This is also probably due to historical reasons – seniority of those recruited in earlier phases may be one factor; continuing ethnic imbalances in university admission is another.

**Reference:**

Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Plan Implementation: Census of Public and Corporation Sector Employment – 1980 Sri Lanka June 1983.

## TABLE 5 - PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES BY MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AND RACE (THE STATE SERVICES)

| Occupational Groups | Sinhalese (73.98) | | Tamils (18.16) | | Moors (7.12) | | Malays (0.29) | | Burghers (0.26) | | Others (0.20) | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 311089 | (84.3) | 42818 | (11.43) | 12283 | (3.33) | 1109 | (0.30) | 1356 | (0.36) | 194 | (0.05) | 368849 |
| Professional Technical and Related Workers | 116557 | (82.4) | 17123 | (12.11) | 7204 | (5.09) | 195 | (0.13) | 249 | (0.17) | 59 | (0.04) | 141387 |
| Administrative and Managerial Workers | 3013 | (81.3) | 576 | (15.54) | 71 | (1.91) | 25 | (0.67) | 14 | (0.37) | 6 | (0.16) | 3705 |
| Clerical and Related Workers | 61137 | (83.7) | 9647 | (13.21) | 1577 | (2.16) | 323 | (0.44) | 280 | (0.38) | 33 | (0.04) | 72997 |
| Sales Workers | 1741 | (83.1) | 297 | (14.81) | 46 | (2.19) | 2 | (0.09) | 5 | (0.23) | 3 | (0.04) | 2094 |
| Service Workers | 23839 | (86.9) | 2472 | (9.01) | 668 | (2.43) | 112 | (0.40) | 325 | (1.18) | 12 | (0.04) | 27428 |
| Agricultural, Animal Husbandry and Forestry Workers, Fishermen and Hunters | 2145 | (73.2) | 618 | (21.09) | 145 | (4.98) | 10 | (0.34) | 10 | (0.34) | 1 | (0.03) | 2930 |
| Production and Related Workers, Transport Equipment Operators and Labourers | 86268 | (85.5) | 11511 | (11.05) | 2345 | (2.32) | 334 | (0.33) | 311 | (0.30) | 72 | (0.07) | 100841 |
| Workers not Classified by Occupation | 16389 | (93.8) | 574 | (3.28) | 226 | (1.29) | 108 | (0.61) | 162 | (0.92) | 8 | (0.04) | 17467 |



## TABLE 5A - CORPORATION SECTOR EMPLOYEES BY MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS AND RACE (PUBLIC SECTOR)

| Occupational Groups | Sinhalese (73.98) | | Tamils (18.16) | | Moors (7.12) | | Malays (0 29) | | Burghers (0.26) | | Others (0.20) | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 195955 | (85.74) | 24373 | (10.66) | 5847 | (2.55) | 1031 | (0.45) | 1081 | (0.47) | 244 | (0.1) | 228531 |
| Professional Technical and Related Workers | 8155 | (75.5) | 2304 | (21.33) | 202 | (1.87) | 64 | (0.59) | 48 | (0.44) | 28 | (0.25) | 10801 |
| Administrative and Managerial Workers | 4539 | (83.3) | 682 | (12.51) | 127 | (2.33) | 56 | (1.02) | 28 | (0.57) | 16 | (0.29) | 5448 |
| Clerical and Related Workers | 62596 | (86.5) | 7175 | (9.92) | 1678 | (2.32) | 412 | (0.56) | 399 | (0.55) | 63 | (0.08) | 72323 |
| Sales Workers | 892 | (87.2) | 85 | (8.31) | 22 | (2.15) | 10 | (0.97) | 12 | (1.17) | 1 | (0.09) | 1022 |
| Service Workers | 11602 | (87.6) | 1111 | (8.39) | 389 | (2.93) | 51 | (0.38) | 71 | (0.53) | 16 | (0.12) | 13240 |
| Agricultural, Animal Husbandry and Forestry Workers, Fishermen and Hunters | 4541 | (60.8) | 2671 | (35 81) | 86 | (1.15) | 84 | (1.12) | 58 | (0.77) | 18 | (0.24) | 7458 |
| Production and Related Workers, Transport Equipment Operators and Labourers | 101884 | (88.0) | 9687 | (8.36) | 3278 | (2.83) | 337 | (2.23) | 452 | (0.37) | 77 | [illegible] | [illegible] |
| Workers not Classified by Occupation | 1746 | (69.7) | 658 | (26.27) | 65 | (2.59) | 17 | (0.67) | 13 | (0.51) | 5 | (0.19) | 2504 |

# A Note on the Impact of British Constitutional Policy on Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka

**Susil Siriwardana**

I believe that the most open and direct manifestation of policy and action based on ethnic considerations to be found during the British colonial era is located within the area of British constitutional policy. Hence I have decided to focus attention on this limited area. Within this limited area, it is necessary to trace the impact on first, the national elite, and then, on those wider elements outside the elite. This is especially important I think, because of the most distinctive feature of our national movement which is that the elite had only a friendly contradiction with their colonial rulers, while it must be assumed that the masses had an antagonistic relation with the British.

## Resistance and the First Phase (1908-1920)

The idea of 'communal electorates' was a part and parcel of British constitutional policy from the time of Colebrooke. In the first Legislative Council of 1833, the Unofficials numbering six, consisted of 3 Europeans, 1 Burgher, 1 Sinhalese and 1 Tamil. While constitutional issues were mildly canvassed after the 1860s, they began to be articulated with some force again, only in 1908. It is well to remember that by this time not only were the mercantilist roots of the plantation economy well entrenched and the pioneers of the English-educated elite at large about town, but the gathering momentum of the vernacular nationalist revivalist movement had also clearly registered itself. In other words, the social conditions themselves were propitious for an attitude of resistance to communal ideas. What happened in 1908 then? Let us listen to Dr. G. C. Mendis' account about it:

> The English-educated middle class demanded in 1908 the reform of the Legislative Council and the establishment of territorial electorates, in harmony with te administrative and economic unification which had alredy taken place. The British Government then, deviating rom the objectives of the Colebrooke Reforms on th ground that society in Ceylon was still divided by nce, established communal electorates instead of trying t weld the people into a single nation by the creation of territorial electorates as requested. (Mendis, p. 115)

Dr. Mendis goes on to say why the middle class asked for territorial electorates.

> The problems of government were now more economic and territorial than racial, as the administration for some time had been conducted on a territorial basis. Hence they demanded that territorial representation should replace communal representation. (Mendis, p. 83)

In this instance we noticed clearly that while the nationalists were acting rationally and progressively, the colonialists were acting in a way that tended to keep the various communities divided. Are we to understand this as a simple error of judgement?

Though the Riots of 1915 divided up the Sinhala and Muslim peoples, it had the salutary effect of unifying the leaders of the elite. Arunachalam's impassioned condemnation of the British brutality in putting down the riots and his moving plea for the release of the Sinhalese leaders who had been imprisoned, two years later, earned him the presidency of the Ceylon National Congress. Though we are on thin ground would we be wrong in understanding these events as further positive contributions towards strengthening and internalising resistance to communal thinking?

## Surrender and the Second Phase (1920-1947)

By 1920 the unity forged under strain by the elite is definitively shattered thanks to the singular designs of Governor Manning. In that year he first drove a wedge between the Kandyans and the Low Countrymen in the Congress and

made the former withdraw from it on the promise of a separate communal electorate for the Kandyans. Then in 1921 he manipulated the split between Arunachalam and the Congress. In August of that year the Tamil elite formed their own Tamil Mahajana Sabhai to articulate their demand as a minority community. Here is Prof. K. M. de Silva's appraisal of Manning's constitutional handywork:

> Manning regarded the Ceylon National Congress as an intolerable challenge to the British position in Ceylon, and set about the business of fashioning its discomfiture with a ruthlessness that befitted a more formidable adversary.... Suffice it to say that he achieved it (discomfiture) through a skilful and deliberate manipulation of the communal differences and tensions in Ceylon's plural society. Indeed his handling of the problems of constitutional reform in Ceylon would serve as an illuminating textbook case study in the application of a policy of *divide et impera*. (Univ. vol. 3, p. 396)

While Manning's desire to subvert is rational from the colonial standpoint, the surrender on the part of the elite like Sir James Pieris requires explanation. We must emphasize that the unity that was shattered in this instance, proved to be very costly, in that communal politics came to dominate and spread like a cancer thereafter. It is here that we have to question the whole source of strength of the elite. On questioning we find that the mass base of the elite was minimal; it was introverted and confined to a clique of families and landowing interests; it had no cultural roots amongst the vernacular national movement; its perception of colonialism was that of a master who will always act justly by his charge; what was needed was not political independence but a wider participation of the elite. It is quite clear to us that this elite drew no real legitimacy from the nationalist masses and their sufferings; on the contrary, they were in the position of welcoming colonialism so long as the elite too was accommodated at the governing levels. It would appear that this internalisation of colonial stereotypes was total and that they were ready to play the game according to the colonialist's rules.



From this point, the contradictions that matured were not between the nationalists and the colonialists, but rather among different national communities. The fissiparous tendency proliferated and the process of organising each one's own community became the first priority. Each community turned more and more onto itself, and developed its new-found self-consciousness with fervent zeal. Unity *among and between* communities, gave way to unity *within* communities. This meant that communalism had passed through a new stage of rationalisation. Communalism was consolidated in the process. The visible manifestations of this trend were the Tamil Mahajana Sabhai (1920), Sinhala Maha Sabha (1937), the Muslim League, and the Tamil Congress (1944). Look how the community identity is proclaimed loud and clear!

When it came to the Donoughmore Commission in 1927, communalism was institutionalised, and the minorities demanded communal representation most fervently. Now it was the turn of the colonialists to analyse its evil. The Commissioners declared:

> We have unhesitatingly come to the conclusion that communal representation is as it were, a canker of the body politic eating deeper and deeper into the vital energies of the people, breeding self-interest, suspicion and animosity, poisoning the new growth of political consciousness and effectively preventing the development of a national or corporate spirit. (Dr. Mendis, p. 117)

With the abandonment of communal representation first in the Donoughmore Constitution and later in the Soulbury Constitution, the wheel has gone full circle.

However, we must return to the question of the impact of these policies on the masses. What about the radicals among the elite like A. E. Goonesinhe, whose Young Lanka League cried out for Swaraj in the 1920s? What about the vernacular nationalists, whose interests would have been different from that of the elite? Finally what about the working classes and the broad masses? In other words we have to settle the question of the impact of colonial policies on other strata of our nationalist movement.

## Underdevelopment of Ideology

Radicals of the twenties like A. E. Goonesinhe came to a sorry pass a decade later, when they had to seek refuge in communalism out of all slogans to stake their last political claims before leaving the stage for ever. What better irony than this of the shallowness of our nationalism. What blind-spots it is capable of having concealed behind its radical facade ! What it means is an imperfect understanding of the history of our plural society and the far-reaching implications of this plurality under anti-colonial, nation-making conditions. It means that our thinkers at this time had not grasped the essential nature of colonialism and the question of political power ( political independence). These two issues are vitally interlinked, because the classic opportunity and experience of national unity is in the united struggle of all nationalities and ethnic groups against the colonial enemy. It is this struggle that determines the quality of nationalism, its depth and breadth. It is here that the various strata of our national movement are guilty of evasions and compromises. While it can be considered a failure of political vision, more generally it can be considered a failure in the development of ideology.

What about the next strata, the vernacular nationalists ? Perhaps it is correct to say that the vernacular nationalist movement, for all its militancy and nationalism, possessed, as often such movements do, certain reactionary tendencies. One of these was a communal content. Our nationalist movement also sought legitimacy and inspiration in the past. In the process, it would have naturally revived certain nationalist myths like Sri Lanka being the land of the Sinhala Buddhists. Unless such a vision into the past was balanced by a sufficient awareness of modern democratic thinking, it is very likely that its acquired nationalism would have a content of ethnic prejudice and obscurantism. Sinhala intellectuals like Cumaratunga Munidasa and Hemapala Munidasa would be good examples of exemplary nationalists, who nevertheless manifest attitudes of unconscious communalism. Their encounter with national culture did not result in an encounter with a modern



humanism and a political consciousness, which would have seen them through the ethnic barrier that has been erected in our midst. Thus we may answer our opening question by saying that many of the vernacular nationalists would have joined an organisation like the Sinhala Maha Saba, while a minority would have espoused the left movement.

Finally there is the left movement to account for. While the left movement had a correct perspective on both the National Question as well as that of national independence, and while it did a lot of individual and group work on the basis of communal unity, the whole post - 1964 history of the left forces us to raise questions about the adequacy and density of the perceptions worked out in the thirties and the forties. While the left comes out in a very favourable light in comparison with all the other forces giving leadership to the masses during the colonial period, a more internal assesment, based on the tasks in hand seen retrospectively, shows up a certain thinness of effort. This is necessarily linked to the whole omission on the left of the cultural question, which proved disastrous later on, in the kind of guilts and distortions it produced during the 'second wave' of Sinhala nationalism as it has been called. The serious limitation of the under-development of theory and research by he left movement during the first two or three decades, calls upon us to be critical of the superficial character of th: perception of these issues at the start of the movement.

Our underdevelopment of ideology in general and in an issue like the unity of the different nationalities in the anti-colonial struggle in particular, is brought into relief the moment we compare the experience of our other neighbours in struggle. On the one hand, there are the teachings of the Marxist teachers who have confronted these problems clearly. Then there are the teachings of bourgeois humanists. Finally there are the examples of people like Jose Marti and Sukarno, who perceived these issues with great clarity See what Sukarno's biographer has to say about the development of his thinking in his early years around 1926:

His political instinct led him to believe that he could bridge these divisions. His eclectic inclinations fitted him for the task and led him, in his own elaboration of nationalism, to draw on a variety of intellectual sources. He could apply a Marxist analysis of imperialism or make use of Muslim hostility to infidel domination, but in so doing he was concerned to develop the central idea of the nation as an entity which could reconcile conflicting elements in Indonesian society and subordinate them to an overarching ideal.

(Legge, p. 80)

## Notes

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