

*Sri Lanka*

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**RACISM**

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and the

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**AUTHORITARIAN  
STATE**

**RACE &  
CLASS**

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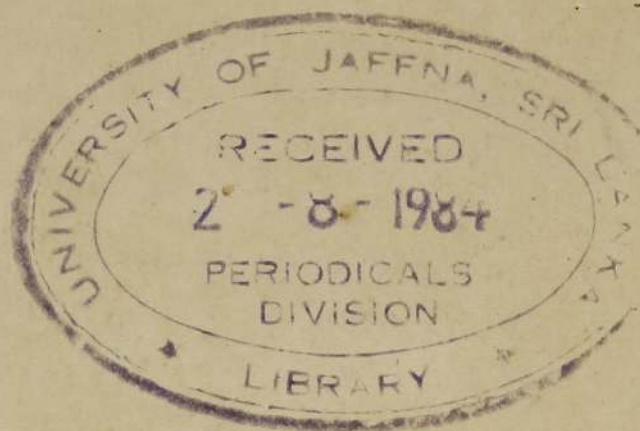
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# Editorial

Ever since independence successive Sri Lankan governments have done everything in their power, from state-sponsored racism to state-sponsored pogroms, to render the Tamils a separate people, and inferior – and then cried out against that separatism when the Tamils embraced it to carve out their own dignity and future. After the anti-Tamil pogroms of a year ago, the President, at the instance of the Indian government, had agreed to an all-party conference to decide the ‘Tamil question’. But even before the talking could begin, he demanded that the Tamils give up their last vestige of dignity and independence by taking an oath forswearing even the mention of a separate state on pain of severe civil punishment. This proviso (the sixth amendment to the constitution) also removed the Tamil MPs, who had been elected on the platform of an independent Tamil state, from the opposition benches and sent them naked into the conference chamber, where they now represented no one but themselves. The President had, in effect, chosen to negotiate Tamil rights with the enemies of the Tamil people. The conference was a sham.

But, then, to have looked to the Sinhala state at all for the reparation of past wrongs and the guarantee of future rights was both sterile and stupid. The conference was no more than a holding exercise for the government to gather its broken economy and mount another military operation against the civilian population in the Tamil North – on the lines, this time, of Thompson’s counter-insurgency operations in Malaya, aided first by SAS-trained men and now by the Israelis.

The first article in this anniversary issue of the July massacres, ‘Racism and the politics of underdevelopment’ by A. Sivanandan, analyses the growth of Sinhala-Buddhist racism, locating its past in

colonialism and underdevelopment, and its future in the authoritarian state – discussing in the process the specific nature of Sri Lanka's 'disorganic development' and the classes and parties thrown up by it. How that class formation was mixed up with and generated the communalism of the early twentieth century is the theme of Kumari Jayawardena's paper on 'Class formation and communalism', while Rachel Kurian's article on 'Plantation politics' (jointly written with Jenny Bourne and Hazel Waters) highlights the political chicanery that is needed to keep the most oppressed section of the Tamils and the most exploited section of the working class at subsistence level.

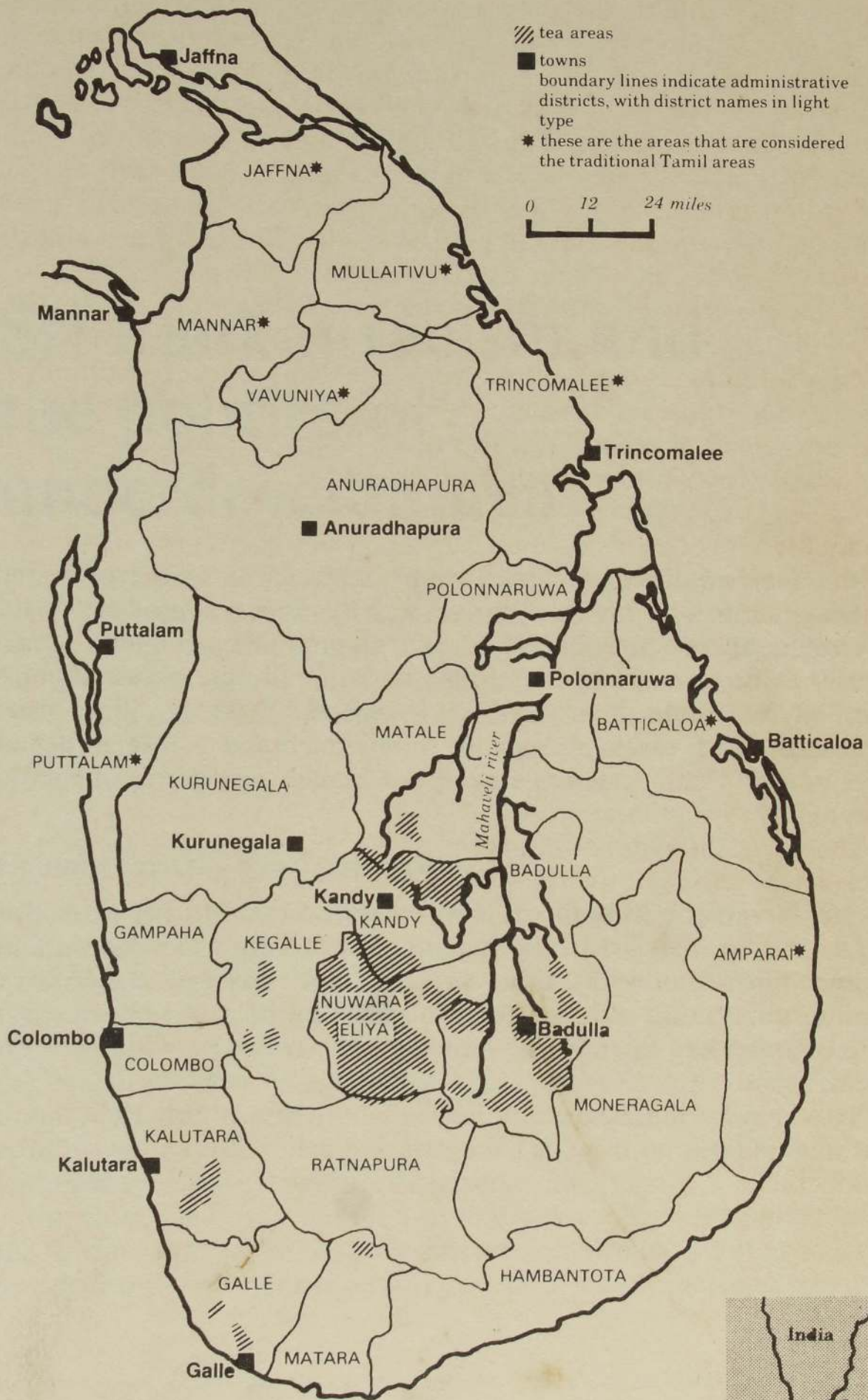
Of the events of July 1983 no accounts could be more poignant than those of the people who suffered and/or witnessed them first-hand – and in 'Sri Lanka's week of shame' we publish one such testimony to the horror of those days. Sanmugathan's 'Story of the holocaust' on the other hand, is a painfully objective attempt not only to document the actual events but to search for their causes.

July 1983 was not without precedent however – nor indeed was the undoubted involvement of police or army or government supporters. In the 'Notes and documents' section we publish a dossier of human rights violations over recent years, which demonstrates how legislative enactment and government decision have provided a climate for such abuses to be carried out with impunity while the press, for the most part, has looked the other way. And from Nancy Murray's unremitting catalogue of repression against the Tamils emerges a picture of ruthless and indiscriminate state violence – which again has been distorted or ignored by the national press.

The press, though, has not been solely responsible for the culture of racism that allows of such government action. To understand that and the relationship between government, the clergy and the press, one needs also to understand the Sinhala-Buddhist racist doctrine as expounded by Industries Minister Cyril Mathew among others. No reply to these doctrines could be as forceful as the cold, dispassionate, reporting of facts here assembled by the Committee for Rational Development.

To round off the issue, we publish a bibliography 'July 1983 and the national question in Sri Lanka' by the eminent bibliographer, H.A.I. Goonetilleke.

*June 1984*







# Sri Lanka: racism and the politics of underdevelopment

There have been no race riots in Sri Lanka since independence. What there has been is a series of increasingly virulent pogroms against the Tamil people by the Sinhala state – resulting in the degeneracy of Sinhala society and its rapid descent into barbarism. And all this has been achieved in the name of Sinhala civilisation and Buddhist enlightenment – within a matter of thirty-five years – by the concerted efforts of politicians, priests and private armies.

## **Colonial capitalism and nationalism**

When the British left Ceylon in 1948, the lines of communal conflict had already been drawn. One hundred and fifty years of British rule had brought together three different social formations under one central administration for purposes of economic exploitation; but for purposes of political control, the colonial government had reinforced the communal divisions that ran like a seam around those social formations. It divided in order to rule what it integrated in order to exploit. And it raised a class of administrators, suckled on English language and English culture, to reconcile the contradictions.

But then, the type of capitalism that developed in Sri Lanka under the British could neither destroy the pre-capitalist modes of production nor develop a coherent capitalist system in which the economic base

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would determine (in the final analysis, of course) the political and ideological superstructure. Instead, it had a differential impact on the different social formations and made capitalism's uneven development more uneven still. And what it could not cohere through organic capitalist development, it unified through administrative diktat. In the event, the social formations of the Kandyan highlands, the maritime provinces and the Northern peninsula,\* which had for centuries co-existed side by side, now began to vie with each other for the favours of the colonial state – or, rather, the dominant classes within these social formations began to do so.

The character of that class differed with each social formation. In the Kandyan social formation, dominated by the feudal mode of production and untouched by foreign conquest till the advent of the British in 1815, the dominant class was the feudal aristocracy. In the coastal areas, and more particularly the western littoral, which had been subjected to almost 300 years of Portuguese commerce and Dutch mercantile capitalism, a merchant class with private property in land had emerged. The barren North, though similarly subjected to Portuguese (and then Dutch) rule from the early seventeenth century, was inhospitable to all colonial enterprise except missionary. The dominant mode, though tribute-paying, was not strictly feudal: the land was owned outright by the highest caste, the *vellala*, and not feudated of the king.<sup>1</sup> And the highest caste also happened to be the most numerous (unlike in India). Hence, the land-holdings were small – and further fragmented by the dowry system.

The population of the Kandyan kingdom was predominantly Sinhala and Buddhist, though the king and the royal court were mostly Tamil. The maritime provinces had a mixture of 'races' – Arabs, Burghers,\*\* Sinhalese, Tamils – and religions – Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu – but were largely Sinhalese and Buddhist. The Northern peninsula, though christianised by Portuguese and Dutch missions, remained predominantly Hindu – and Tamil. The caste system was more rigid here than in the other two social formations, but was ameliorated by the comparatively smaller numbers of the lower castes (in relation to the *vellalas*).

Into these social formations, colonial capitalism inserted the plantation 'mode' – as an enclave, within what was once the Kandyan kingdom, with its own imported, indentured, Indian Tamil labour force and a social order of its own, a colony within a colony – on common land on which the Sinhala peasants had once grazed their cattle, and on forest land which had freed them if need be from corvée labour

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\*These formed three separate kingdoms – the Kandyan, Kotte and Jaffna – at the time of the first European intrusion by the Portuguese in 1505.

\*\*Descendants of mixed marriages between the Dutch and the Ceylonese.

through slash and burn cultivation. Waste lands, the British called them, without ownership or title, and, passing an Ordinance that decreed them property of the crown (1840), gave them away to the British planter at the upset price of five shillings per acre.<sup>2</sup> Already in 1818, whole villages had been alienated to the Kandyan nobility as reward for their help in quelling the peasant rebellion of the previous year – thereby altering a service and tribute-paying relationship into one of landlord and tenant. A landed aristocracy had been born and, with it, a landless peasantry. It was left to the Waste Lands Ordinance of 1897 to dispossess them completely, but, rather than drift into the semi-slave conditions of plantation work, they remained on the land as agricultural labour.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the plantation 'mode' had begun to dominate the economy, subsume all other modes to its own uses, build an infrastructure of railways and roads to take its produce to world markets, and develop a mighty business of sorting and selling, clearing and forwarding, insuring and shipping – and a species of local sucker capitalists to go with it. And to that species was added the dominant classes of earlier social formations to form the genus 'comprador'.

Some of these, particularly in the South, now owned their own little coconut, coffee and rubber plantations and graphite mines, either settled on them by grateful Dutch and British administrators or bought outright from the ill-gotten gains of the arrack industry. And they could afford to finish off their sons' education in Oxford and Cambridge and, later, the LSE, the better to enable them to take their place beside the colonialists in running the country.

However, it is also from this area of the country, the longest exposed to foreign influence and domination, that a proletariat emerges from the ranks of a long dispossessed peasantry – to work in the docks and the railways and the roads, in the engineering works and the construction industry. But it is still a proletariat with one foot in the land – or an eye to the land that its wages could buy back. Only the Tamil worker imported from South India to do the more laborious work in the ports and on the roads constituted the classical urban proletariat of capitalism.

The Tamil North was infertile, barren – no rivers, no forests, no mountains – nothing grew there except children. But if it was inhospitable to colonial enterprise, it was inviting of missionary zeal and education. The first was to close down its economic options, the second to open them up in the service of the Raj.\* The industry of a people who had worked an ungiving land was now given over to education, and the government service, into which education could take

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\*Tamils served the British in Malaya, Singapore etc.

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them. Education was land. And so the *vellalas* sent their sons to school and into the colonial service and the professions – and those who did well rose in prestige and position and came to own land and property, in Colombo and other parts of the country where their services took them. They soon came to be known as the ‘Colombo Tamils’ and were to take their place beside their English-educated Sinhala counterparts in their common quest for political office.

Below them was another tier of government service, Tamils who had probably made it to 7th standard English or even the Junior Cambridge (failed) – and it was they who did the clerical work, the lesser accounts (later, of course, to become cashiers and *shroffs*\* in the *kachcheries*\*\* and banks) or went about helping the British to open up railway stations and post offices in the malaria-infested interior. Forced to leave their families at home in Jaffna, they became a rootless migrant labour force with only their religion and their language and their culture to hold on to.

For the vast majority of the people in Jaffna Province, however, and especially for the low caste folk, very little had changed. The *vellalas* still owned the fragmented land and the lower castes worked for them for a pittance.

If the ruling classes of the old formations and the rising new bourgeoisie of the plantation economy were beginning to find their comprador niche in the colonial order – though not without combat – and therein discover a common purpose, there was little to unite the various sections of the working class. The plantation workers were segregated in a bantustan and separated by language, caste and creed – and, above all, the labour process – from the Sinhala peasantry around them and from the rest of the working class. Only on the docks and the railways and the roads did the Indian labourer work side by side with Sinhala labour. And as for the native Tamil labourer, he was virtually non-existent outside the Jaffna peninsula and the Eastern Province. The most frequent contact that the Sinhala worker had with the indigenous Tamil was in the latter’s capacity as small shopkeeper or lesser bureaucrat. Only among the lower-middle class clerical workers was there a shared work experience among Sinhalese and Tamils – but their unity suffered from the handicaps of their class.

Neither a national bourgeoisie, then, nor a fully-fledged proletariat and only the most venal of petit-bourgeoisies – ‘small landowners, artisans, craftsmen, small petty producers mainly rural-based... educated in the indigenous languages ...’ and ‘a new group (mainly urban) of clerks, minor bureaucrats, shopkeepers and teachers generated by the needs of the plantation economy’<sup>3</sup> – that was the class character

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\*Chief cashiers.

\*\*Town halls.

of Sri Lanka at the turn of the century, with the British plantocracy at the top and Indian merchant capitalists a tier below.

Colonial capitalism had bred neither a capitalist class that out of sheer economic compulsion was dying to break its colonial integument nor a proletariat that could see beyond race and religion to its own class interests. Power for the colonial bourgeoisie and the colonial proletariat lay not in economic hegemony or in class struggle, but in the trappings and appurtenances of the colonial state on the one hand and its hand-outs and favours on the other. The 'bourgeoisie' vied for a place in the colonial sun, the 'proletariat' for a place in bourgeois patronage. The path to economic power was through political power – politics was not, as in central capitalism, the handmaiden of economics – and political power was in the hands of the colonial state. State power was all.

For a moment, though, the nationalist and working-class agitations of the first quarter of the twentieth century looked as though they might take off into anti-colonial struggle. Elements of such a movement had already emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century in the form of a broad-based religious revival – Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim – aimed at contesting Christian privilege and Christian culture. Led by the middle-class intelligentsia, it had found its immediate expression in a rash of anti-Christian publications, followed by the founding of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim schools, and ending up in the pioneering strike of the printing workers in 1893, during which arose (and fell) the first trade union: that of the printers.\* The reactionary excesses of this revival, however, had also resulted in the first religious riot – between Catholics and Buddhists in the north of Colombo.

It was this same spirit of religious revivalism that fired the bourgeois-led temperance movement of 1903-05 and, raging through the South in demonstrations, processions, publications, associations, singed the beard of government. More, it pointed the way to rebellion among ordinary working-class people and set the mood for the carters' strike of 1906.\*\* The strike was remarkable in that it had all communities and creeds in its ranks and won the unstinting support of all the working people of Colombo, who egged the carters on to greater defiance of the police. And this in turn encouraged the temperance movement to spread itself further into the working population and the rural masses and become more self-consciously political. But the

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\* Much of the information in this section is owed to Kumari Jayawardena's seminal and path-breaking work on the labour movement in Ceylon.<sup>4</sup>

\*\* Bullock carts were essential for transporting plantation produce and exports and imports to and from Colombo harbour.

constitutional reform of 1910 confined the franchise to the western-educated elite and continued to keep the rising new bourgeoisie from power, precipitating its involvement in the railway strike of 1912. Though the strike itself was 'secular', relating to the cost of living and wages of railway workers, and included workers of all creeds and communities, the Sinhala strikers were not unaffected by the anti-Indian outpourings in the Sinhala press and the strident nationalism of the more aggressive leaders like Dharmapala, who now inveighed against Moors and Tamils (in addition to Europeans) as 'infidels of a degraded race'. Consequently, when the strike was bought off with a Commission and the Commission itself failed to grant any of the workers' demands, whether about pay, conditions of work, promotion or the use of Indian labour in preference to Sinhala, the workers' simmering frustration and anger, made worse by the shortages of the 1914-18 war, burst out in physical violence against Moor traders and money-lenders. Anti-Muslim riots had already broken out in Kandy over a religious dispute the previous day and the railway workers in Colombo now found common cause with them.

The riots spread and the government, which had espoused the cause of the Muslims, over-reacted, fearing that the whole thing was a Sinhala-German plot. Martial law was declared on 2 June 1915 and every white man, civilian and military, given permission to shoot and kill at will.\* Punjabi soldiers, mostly Muslim, were brought in to maintain law and order and the courts martial sentenced over fifty people to summary execution. Temperance leaders (even the most moderate, like D.S. Senanayake, the future prime minister) were imprisoned and railway workers who had revealed themselves as militants at the hearings of the Railway Commission exiled to the Eastern Province.

The bourgeois nationalist 'revolution' was dead – it had died of its own religious and communal contradictions: its inability to turn a religious crusade into a (secular) political campaign embracing all sects and/or a working-class movement embracing all races. The cultural resistance of the Sinhala-Buddhists, in other words, did not – precisely because it was Sinhala and Buddhist – 'take on', as Cabral has it, 'new forms (political, economic, armed) in order fully to contest foreign domination'. And it remained confined to Sinhala-Buddhism precisely because the 'bourgeoisie' that colonial capitalism created had vision of neither nation nor class.

This applied to the Tamil 'bourgeoisie' too who, raised on western education and western values, found a sinecure in government office and were loth to rock the colonial boat. There was the odd exception,

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\* By a subsequent Act of Indemnity the 'shooters' were placed beyond the reach of the law.

though, like Arunachalam who even as Registrar-General took up the cause of his people, Sinhalese and Tamil, Buddhist and Hindu, urban worker and estate labourer – and was to found not only the Ceylon National Congress as a vehicle for nationalist politics but a plethora of welfare organisations to serve the interests of the masses.\* And for a while it looked as though, at the level of political bargaining with the colonial government at least, the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisies could come together – they had earlier ‘elected’ the Tamil Ramanathan to the ‘educated seat’ in the Legislative Council and he in turn championed the Sinhala cause in the riots of 1915.\*\* But Governor Manning, who had formerly handled the Mahdi uprising in the Sudan and other such threats to British power, found even such a fragile unity of the western-educated elite threatening to him and his government’s position and set out to play the communal game.\*\*\* And the lick-spittle bourgeoisie took to it as to the manner born. Soon they were reviving their feudal feuds – with the effete up-country aristocracy demanding self-determination for the ‘Kandyan race’, the Tamils holding up their better (western) education and their faithful government service for preferential treatment, and the low-country Sinhalese shrewdly building up their communal base among the rural elite of native physicians, village schoolmasters and Buddhist monks through Mahajana Sabhas (Peoples’ Associations) cobbled together from the now defunct temperance organisations. (They were subsequently to provide the basis for Bandaranaike’s Sinhala Maha Sabha and mark out his communal constituency.)†

But if the bourgeoisie had shot its radical bolt and settled for constitutional plea-bargaining through lobbies such as the Ceylon National Congress, the working-class movement benefited by the religious-nationalist demise to become more secularly working-class. And the fact that the reformists now sought their support in the rural elite and not among the urban workers left the latter free to pursue their own class interests. Hence, in the railway and dock strikes of 1920, the workers relied on their own resources and self-organisation to take on the employers and win.†† And it was the self-assurance of the working class that determined the militancy of its subsequent

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\* Arunachalam left Congress and politics when, after 1920, Congress moderates were inveigled into participating in the Legislative Council.

\*\* Sinhala communalism at this time was directed against the Indian Tamils and not the ‘indigenous’.

\*\*\* The Ceylonese ‘seats’ in the Legislative Council were directly apportioned on a communal basis and Governor Manning sought to reinforce this in perpetuity. ‘In such a community as this’, he wrote to the Colonial Office, ‘there is naturally plenty of racial strife and jealousy and that will be of value in deciding the composition of the Council.’<sup>5</sup>

† The Tamil response to the Mahajana Sabhas was the Mahajana Sabhais!

†† The Ceylon Workers Welfare League, which was founded by Arunachalam and

leadership in the Ceylon Labour Union and A.E. Goonesinha and characterised the general strike of 1923 and the rash of strikes between 1927 and 1929 – creating in the process an urban working class united across caste and creed and community. More importantly, it was this working-class tail that now began to wag the nationalist dog and pitch Goonesinha (in his political persona) and his Young Lanka League into the more militant politics of *swaraj*. In this they were influenced by the nationalist movement in India – and that in turn augured well for the continuing unity between the urban proletariat and the plantation workers. Though Goonesinha himself had made no attempt to extend his trade union activities to the plantations, he was unstinting in his support of the struggles conducted first by Arunachalam (between 1913 and 1922) and then by Natesa Iyer, Indian member of the Legislative Council, to improve the wages and conditions of Indian estate labour. Natesa Iyer, in fact, was Goonesinha's lieutenant in the dock strike of 1927 and had prevailed upon blackleg labour imported from India to return home – and before that they had jointly edited a paper that was uncompromising in its demand for *swaraj*.

But Goonesinha was also influenced by the British trade union movement and the way it articulated with the parliamentary politics of the British Labour Party and, on his return from the Commonwealth Labour Conference in London in 1928, founded the Ceylon Labour Party and the All-Ceylon Trades Union Congress. This was also the time that the Donoughmore Commission on constitutional reform, appointed by Colonial Secretary Lord Passfield (Sydney Webb), was advocating adult suffrage for Ceylon, despite the strident protests of the Ceylon National Congress – and Goonesinha saw the enfranchisement of the working class as his and, therefore their path to power. He was, after all, the leader of both the trade union movement and the Labour Party, and no doubt his political interest could only serve the workers' economic interest. When, therefore, a deepening recession put the Sinhala urban workers at loggerheads with their Indian fellows, it was not working-class solidarity that claimed Goonesinha's attention but the need to win over the Sinhala majority to his 'parliamentary' cause. He did not, in other words, help the workers to close ranks against the colonial employer as a national labour leader should have; instead, he used their Sinhala chauvinism to gain a ready-made electoral majority. And in his paper, *Viraya* (Hero!), he returned to the virulent communalism of the bourgeois nationalists before him and reinforced further the prejudices of the Sinhala working class. In 1931, he was elected to the solidly Sinhala seat of Colombo Central – and trade unions passed into the keeping of political parties.

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his Social Service League in 1919, and later blossomed into the Ceylon Workers' Federation, never took off into true unionism.



The second nationalist 'revolution', based in the working class, was dead also.\* It had died, like its bourgeois counterpart, of its own communal contradictions. But, unlike the latter, those contradictions had been fomented by a leadership that saw in adult suffrage and territorial representation the built-in advantages of communalism. Equally, the minorities – and in particular the largest and most influential minority, the Tamils – were afraid that they would lose out on the privileges that the divisive politics of colonialism had awarded them beyond their electoral weight. The Kandyan nobility by now had merged its waning fortunes with the up and coming low-country Sinhala entrepreneur-politico and was more anxious about what it would lose through the enfranchisement of the plantation worker than about what it would gain by retaining its (nominated) communal seat in Council. But the signs were that a future Sinhala government would neuter the Indian vote.

The Donoughmore Commissioners had set their faces sternly against Manning's communal scheme of representation in the expectation that territorial electorates had a better chance of engendering a non-communal party system. But they had reckoned without the client bourgeoisie, to whom they must have been really alluding when they wrote that 'the conception of patriotism in Ceylon is as much racial as national'.<sup>7</sup> In the event, the Constitution of 1931 – after a brief spasm of Sinhala-Tamil collaboration in the western reaches of the first State Council where Oxford and Cambridge vied only for debating honours – finally sealed up the communal lines of government that had been fostered by the British for over a century.\*\* So that even when the semblance of a non-communal party system began to emerge with the founding of the LSSP in 1933, it was set in the matrix of bourgeois parliamentary politics (its leaders were from that class anyway) and destined, therefore, to end up in communalism albeit some twenty-five years later. By the time the Soulbury Commission, in the wake of the war and India's successful independence struggle, came to serve up self-government to Ceylon on an Indian platter, an entrenched pan-Sinhala ministry in the last State Council had pointed the way to political, and hence economic, domination.\*\*\* All that was needed

\* Two more flutters of anti-colonial nationalism were to follow – the first, in 1931, when the Jaffna Youth Congress called for a boycott of the State Council elections because the Donoughmore Constitution had not awarded *swaraj*, and the second, in the years following, when anti-Poppy Day protests (the Surya Mal campaign) threatened to burgeon into a fully-fledged anti-British movement under the auspices of the newly-formed (marxist) Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). But the first, remarkable though it was for its anti-caste, anti-communal stance, never got beyond the peninsula and the second got two of its leaders into the State Council ere hardly a shot was fired.<sup>6</sup>

\*\* Representations right up to the 1920s had been on a communal basis and by nomination of the Governor.

\*\*\* The minorities led by G.G. Ponnambalam and his Tamil Congress had demanded a

was a racist ideology to substantiate the one and facilitate the other – and that would be found through communalism.

Colonial capitalism had failed capitalism's first precept – to put economics in command. Instead, it had overlaid the economies of existing social formations to one degree or another with a plantation economy and held them down with a strong state and a mimic culture. What little capitalism escaped through the interstices of a metropolitan-oriented economy was invariably merchant capitalism. And merchant capital's path to power is through patronage. It has not the self-assurance, the audacity of industrial capital, to fashion its own political hegemony – or its style to fashion the culture that furnishes its *raison d'être*.

Everything about colonial capitalism is disorganic, fissiparous, uncreative. It articulates nothing. Even its contradictions do not allow of growth; they congeal instead into paradoxes, holding two dissimilar truths together – a mirage of progress and equally invidious.

Colonial capitalism creates nothing and destroys nothing.\* Instead, it distorts, disfigures, disorientates. It develops the productive forces only to stifle them in the service of the 'mother country'. It engenders new social relations and social classes only to suspend them between the past and the future: the bourgeois temperament remains feudal, the proletarian mind unreleased from the land. It creates a hybrid culture only to frustrate its finest flowering. It promotes liberal democracy only to pave the way to dictatorship. Colonial capitalism aborts capitalist development and leaves the dead foetus in the womb of the past.

### **From nationalism to communalism**

The first act of an independent Ceylonese government under D.S. Senanayake and his United National Party (UNP) was to render plantation workers stateless on the ground that they could not provide legally valid documentation to show that they were citizens of Ceylon by registration or descent. The second (virtually) was to disfranchise them – on the ground that they were not Ceylon nationals! At one

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combined territorial and communal representation which could effect a 50/50 balance between the Sinhalese and the rest, but the Soulbury Commission could not go back on the Donoughmore Constitution and universal franchise.

\* India, though cited as the archetypal example of the opposite view that capitalism in a colony is, in the final analysis, creative (or creative-destructive) was really the exception. India's burgeoning capitalism and its capitalist class were *suppressed* by the British. And it was the nationalist struggle of this suppressed Indian bourgeoisie – to whose assistance Gandhi's feudal genius brought the masses, armed with non-violence and the *charka* – that was the backbone of the independence movement. This is also why bourgeois democracy took natural root in India and not in Ceylon or any other British colony.

parliamentary stroke (more or less), the bourgeoisie had removed a tenth of the population and the whole of the plantation proletariat from effective participation in their and their country's affairs. Constituencies in which the plantation workers once had enough electoral clout to return their own representatives – or tilt the balance in favour of a workers' party like the LSSP\* – now became rotten boroughs for one rotten section of the bourgeoisie or another. Whole constituencies in the hill country were denuded of voters – Talawakelle, for example, dropping from 19,298 to 2,912 – giving an extraordinary weightage to the Sinhala rural voter who, guided in his communal prejudices by the sanction of the law and the benefits of patronage, was, in Ludowyk's telling phrase, 'on his way to becoming the centre of gravity in the political world of Ceylon'.<sup>9</sup>

The Sinhala bourgeoisie was finding its political kingdom through the uses of communalism – and it was a measure of the degeneracy of the Tamil bourgeoisie as represented in G.G. Ponnambalam's Tamil Congress that it was prepared to betray the Indian Tamils to stay in power.\*\* But its turn was still to come.

The portents were already there – in 1949 – when the government inaugurated an irrigation scheme in a predominantly Tamil area of the Eastern Province to settle Sinhala colonists. The idea ostensibly was to provide land for the landless Sinhala peasantry – but in the event, those chosen were the nominees of politicians in search of sure seats. State aid made that assurance doubly sure – the settler was both landowner and state-aided cultivator – and he, together with the casual labourer who his patron had already recruited to the irrigation schemes, would have the run of the settlement. They would 'take care of business', turn into a private army if need be. Their allegiance was to their political patron, the patron's to the governing party, the party's to its (Sinhala) majority. Whether or not colonisation schemes helped the landless Sinhala peasant, they certainly altered the communal composition of constituencies so as to give the Sinhalese a majority. The Tamils were out-voted before they had even begun.

Bandaranaike read the electoral signs early on – and in 1951 left the UNP to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) from the nucleus of his Sinhala Maha Sabha. He was a son and a nephew removed from the UNP line to the throne, anyway, and now was as good a time as any to make his populist move. As Minister for Local Government (1936-51) and through his work with the Mahajana Sabhas of the temperance era – from which his Sinhala Maha Sabha had sprung – he had found the

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\* The LSSP's All Ceylon Estate Workers' Union had supported the plantation workers in their struggles and led the historic strikes on Mooloya and Wewessa estates in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

\*\* There were two exceptions though: S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and C. Vanniansingham, who broke away from the Tamil Congress (TC) to form the Federal Party (FP).

pulse if not of the Sinhala masses, at least of their traditional leaders: the monk, the physician and the teacher – and in their future he saw his own.

But though Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake died the following year, Bandaranaike had to wait till 1956 – till, that is the old man's son and nephew had their whack at government – before he and his SLFP could make a serious bid for power. 1956 also happened to be the year of the Buddha Jayanti (the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's death), said to commemorate the 'unique three-fold event' of the founding of Buddhism, the settlement of Ceylon and the origins of the Sinhala people. And Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike was not loth to present himself as champion of Sinhala-Buddhism: the triangular relationship between King, the *Sangha* (the clergy) and the people of the ancient polity could not have been far from his mind. Sinhala, he declared, abandoning his previous stand for *swabasha* (use of both the vernacular languages), would be the official language and Buddhism the state religion. But the UNP had also latched on to the communalist game and in the Dutch auction that followed, Bandaranaike committed his party to making Sinhala the official language within twenty-four hours of being elected. Even so, the coalition the SLFP had concocted could not have defeated the UNP so decisively but for the agreement of the marxist parties not to contest the same seats\* (on the ground that if the SLFP was not quite socialist, the UNP was certainly capitalist). One breakaway faction of the international marxists in fact joined the SLFP coalition to form the future government (on the ground, one suspects, that it was all right to be nationalist at home, so long as you were internationalist abroad). That this faction was led by Philip Gunawardena, the father of international marxism (in Ceylon that is), served only to show the way to future Trotskyite strategy.

The first act of the 'people's government' was to take away the language rights of a fifth of the people – with a bill that decreed that Sinhala was to replace English as the sole official language of the country. The philosophy behind the Official Language Act was to give the common man and woman a voice in their country's affairs. It was intolerable that only the 5 per cent (both Sinhalese and Tamil) who spoke English should have the running of the government or reap the benefits of office – and it was absurd that 95 per cent of the population should conduct their official dealings through interpreters who translated their native tongues back into a foreign language in order to

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\* The LSSP and the Communist Party (CP) stood for parity of language, but in their anxiety to be left (class-wise), they ended up by being right (race-wise). But, for all that, they were the only parties to put up Tamil candidates at all. The electorates were beginning to be communalised.

be (officially) understood. But it was equally intolerable – and unjust – that the Act, in giving voice to the Sinhala masses, should have shut out that of the Tamils. (The LSSP and CP, having avoided the language issue at the election, fought valiantly now for parity – but who was going to believe them?)

In protest, the Federal Party staged a Gandhian *satyagraha* opposite the Houses of Parliament – and a Sinhala mob egged on by Bandaranaike's coalition partners beat them up. The violence spread to other parts of Colombo and sparked off a conflagration in Gal Oya Valley in which over 150 Tamils were killed by Sinhala 'settlers'. It was no longer the Tamil vote or Tamil land that was endangered by colonisation schemes, but Tamil lives.

At its convention a few months later, the Federal Party, to which more and more Tamils had been driven by Sinhala separatism, called for a federal constitution, equal status for Tamil as an official language, the repeal of the citizenship laws and an end to the colonisation of Tamil areas. If the government did not meet its conditions within a year, it threatened mass civil disobedience.

In July 1957, the Prime Minister conceded the justice of the Tamil case and entered into a pact with Chelvanayakam, the Federal Party leader, to provide legislation that would grant regional autonomy, recognise Tamil as 'the language of administration of the Northern and Eastern Provinces', and end Sinhala colonisation of Tamil areas. But no sooner was the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact concluded than the communalist forces that Bandaranaike himself had nurtured began a violent campaign against it. Only this time, they were led by the UNP Shadow Minister of Finance, J.R. Jayewardene, who headed a 'pilgrimage' of *bhikkus* (monks) and thugs to the Tooth Temple in Kandy to save the Sinhala-Buddhist polity – and was way-laid by an opposing gang of thugs some miles from Colombo.\*

The goondas had been given their head. It only needed government sanction before they cut loose. And that came when, in retaliation for the obliteration of Sinhala number plates on state-owned buses in the North, the goondas in Colombo were allowed by an unseeing police to deface Tamil businesses and homes and harass Tamil passers-by. Their depredations spread to other parts of the country, sanctioned now by priests and political bosses. It was all '*appey anduwa*' (our government) now.

The Prime Minister prevaricated over the promised legislation, the UNP protesting against the division of the country pushed division

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\* This was led by another Bandaranayake (MP) who, after various sojourns in various parties of various hues, was to end up an intrepid communalist (irrespective of party). It was a journey that was to be traversed by a whole host of MPs, both left and right, according to the vicissitudes of the parliamentary game.

further, the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna (United Front of Monks) threatened non-violence if the pact was not abrogated. On the morning of 9 April (1958), 200 *bhikkus* and hundreds more of their assorted cohorts laid siege to the Prime Minister's residence. By afternoon he capitulated: the Pact was revoked.

The *bhikkus* had arrived on the political stage, with the goon squads in close attendance. There was very little to choose between them anyway. The days when the *Sangha* had stood for learning and scholarship had faded under the impact of colonial neglect and christian endeavour. The *pirivennas* (universities) which turned out educated priests and princes alike had fallen into desuetude. The secular learning that was a necessary part of a *samanera's* (novice's) apprenticeship had become secondary to ritual – and the preaching of *banna* and the recital of the *gatha* in Pali, a language as dead as Latin, reified ritual. And the *samanera* himself came to be seen as a necessary aid to clerical celibacy. The Buddhist *bhikku* of the classical era, sworn to abstinence and poverty, freed of greed, had, with rare exception, been succeeded by worldly monks who used their traditional position (restored to them by Bandaranaike) to become wielders of patronage and purveyors of power. Some of them were rich and powerful in their own right – and the prince of them all was the incumbent of the ancient temple of Kelaniya Buddharakkita Thero, whose taste in liquor and women was legend throughout the land. Even the Catholic church at its most corrupt could scarcely have done better – except that it was then at the end of its power; the Buddhist clergy was at the (second) beginning of theirs.

Every move that Bandaranaike now made to make amends for his betrayal of the Pact – such as a bill on the reasonable use of Tamil – was blocked by priests and politicians and the Sinhala press and the mass hysteria they whipped up in the country. The Sinhala language, they warned, was in danger of extinction – and with it the Sinhala people. Where else in the world was Sinhala spoken but in Ceylon? The Tamils at least could look across the Palk Strait to the 40 million Tamils in Tamil Nadu for the preservation of their language and culture.\* Their allegiance, in any case, was not to Lanka but India. Ceylon was for the Sinhalese – and Sinhala should prevail over every other language 'from Point Pedro to Dondra Head'.

The marxist parties were no help to Bandaranaike either. They were more intent on 'embarrassing the government' with strikes than on

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\* 'Danger of South Indian domination was the product of Sinhalese fears of Tamil reactions to the suppression of their language by a Sinhala-only policy.'<sup>10</sup> Ludowyk was writing in 1966, but the attitude of the Sri Lanka government to India after the pogroms of 1983 vindicates his analysis – except that, since then, 'Sinhalese fears' have been honed into a fine ideology of 'Indian expansionism'.

helping it to find a solution to the language question – apart from reiterating their ‘principled stand’ for parity in parliament. But all they discovered in the course of the strikes was that they were losing their troops to communalism.

The country was fast dividing into two separate communities. Even the veneer of class politics that had, at independence, separated the right (the UNP) from the left (LSSP/CP) was beginning to wear thin under the impact of SLFP communalism – not that communalism mattered per se (as yet) but it was a sure passport to power. What was learnt from the disfranchisement of the Indian Tamils could be put to use to emasculate the ‘native Tamils’. But Bandaranaike’s ride to power on the back of communal politics, and his inability to climb off once he got there, proved that communalism was a one-way ticket – to communalism. That had not deterred either the right or the left, though, from being pulled, in varying degrees and at varying pace, into the ‘middle-path’ of Sinhala-Buddhism. The pampered Tamil middle class, having first played along with the Sinhala bourgeoisie, had been forced into fighting Sinhala communalism with Tamil communalism (albeit non-violently).

The ‘marxist’ parties, having thrown themselves whole-heartedly into parliamentary politics from their inception – the leader of the Opposition, Dr N.M. Perera, was also leader of the LSSP – were incapable of fighting the vital issues of class and race outside parliament without having an eye to the vote at the same time. When they failed to defeat the bill disfranchising the plantation workers in the House, they neither brought out their unions in support of their fellow workers nor continued to further the Indian workers’ cause in the country at large. Similarly, they were prepared to fight Bandaranaike’s ‘Sinhala only’ bill in parliament (having first put him there) but failed to fight it outside, either with their trade union power or with their not inconsiderable support among the Sinhala and Tamil intelligentsia. The only extra-parliamentary struggle they had waged was in the *hartal* of 1953, when they ‘led’ the spontaneous uprisings of the masses against rising food prices and the cessation of rice subsidies. But though the government fled to the safety of a ship in harbour, from where to conduct its affairs, the ‘marxists’ turned tail at the last moment and left the workers stranded. Now, against the rising tide of communalism, all they could do was to advance the cause of parity in a bourgeois parliament or retreat to the comfort of marxist dogma and dismiss communalism as a capitalist red herring spoiling the spoor of class struggle.

There was no one to speak up for the Tamils except the Tamils. And no Tamil party spoke to their interest like the Federal Party. But the Federalists had failed to deliver on the B-C Pact. It was imperative, therefore, that their convention in May 1958 should resurrect the

strategy of mass disobedience, the threat of which had brought Bandaranaike to the negotiating table in the first place.

But as they set out for the convention in Vavuniya in the Northern Province, the goon squads, under instructions from their political bosses, were getting ready to way-lay them at Polonnaruwa. Their instructions at this stage, according to Tarzie Vittachi's painfully objective report of the events, were to 'stone buses and trains, hoot and generally signify "disapprobation"'.<sup>11</sup> But this was the same assortment of casual labourers and squatters from the irrigation and land development schemes in Polonnaruwa area who, a year earlier, had driven Tamil workers from the land allotted to them under a compensation scheme. They had called themselves the Sinhala Hamudawa then (the Sinhala army), and, led by a monk, had set out to stem a Tamil 'invasion' of their traditional homelands. Another invading horde of Tamils, it was now put about, was converging from Trincomalee and Batticaloa on the ancient capital of Polonnaruwa – and the Sinhala Hamudawa girded for battle, derailing and smashing up trains in the hunt for Tamils. And when that yielded little, they rampaged through the town 'raping, looting and beating up Tamil labourers and officers'. In the days following, the atrocities began to mount in number and intensity and spread rapidly to other parts of the country. In Batticaloa, Tamil fishermen retaliated by burning the huts of their Sinhalese fellows and driving them out into a hostile sea. In Colombo and the South, Tamil businesses and properties were looted and set on fire – and Tamil passengers in cars and buses, identified by their inability to read Sinhala or recite a Buddhist *gatha* (hymn), taken out and murdered. In Ratmalana, opposite the bus terminal, a game of Tamil-burning had developed, where one man would chase the victim with a can of petrol and douse him, while another flicked a lighted match at him. And yet the government said and did nothing.

When the Prime Minister finally came on the radio – four days after the 'riots' began – ostensibly to heal the communal breach, he pointed to the unexplained death of a Sinhala businessman and ex-mayor (of Nuwara Eliya) in the Tamil District of Batticaloa on the 25th May as the cause of 'the various acts of violence and lawlessness' that had begun on the 22nd! The death of one Sinhalese man seemed to weigh more heavily on the Prime Minister's conscience than the hundreds of Tamils burnt, mutilated, raped and hacked to death. Only the previous night, Tamil labourers and their families on the government farms at Polonnaruwa and Hingurakgoda had been simultaneously massacred. At Polonnaruwa, they had fled into the sugar-cane bushes of their own planting, only to be burnt out of hiding and bludgeoned to death. At Hingurakgoda, forty families were systematically slaughtered. Only the initiative, courage and innate humanity of the government agent of the District and his police officers and constables



(all Sinhala) prevented the spread of mass murder. No such roll-call of honour was conceivable twenty-five years later.

The Prime Minister's broadcast served only to incense the Sinhalese further and trigger off a spate of rumours about Tamil atrocities – which in turn justified the killing of more Tamils. Finally, on 27 May, the Governor-General, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, declared a State of Emergency and brought out the troops.\* The riots continued in parts of Colombo despite the curfew and reached Jaffna the following day – when reports of an attack on a Hindu temple in the South and the burning of its priest led to a revenge attack on a Buddhist temple in Jaffna town and the vandalisation, the following day, of a resplendent Buddhist shrine on the offshore island of Nainativu. 'No attempt was made to do bodily harm to the Sinhalese', comments Vittachi. But 'they were told to leave their homes and their shops ... and then their goods were dragged out on to the road and heaped up and burnt.' That, at least, the 'local leaders' felt was owed to 'their brothers and sisters in the South.'<sup>13</sup>

And there were 12,000 of them in the refugee camps in Colombo alone, who were eventually sent off to Jaffna by ship, because the roads and railways were still unsafe. And that led a racist Sinhala MP to make the unintentional prophecy that it was the government that was dividing the country by sending the Tamils back to the North and East. But the government put it all down to a Muscovite plot – and placed the Tamil leaders in detention.

With the Emergency to keep Sinhala mobs at bay and detention to keep Federalists out of Tamil reach, Bandaranaike returned to his 'middle-path' and brought in an Act which gave him, as Prime Minister, the right to effect regulations for the reasonable use of Tamil – and then proceeded to do nothing. A year later, he was shot dead by a *bhikku* – at the instigation of the Rev Buddharakkita Thero, the sybarite high priest of the Kelaniya temple and secretary of the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna.

### **From communalism to racism**

Communalism had grown out of a soured nationalism which, having failed to wrest power from the British through an anti-colonial struggle uniting the various communities, turned them (the communities) to wresting it from each other when it was thrown to them like a bone. The trappings of bourgeois democracy had decreed that that power should reside in the majority. Such a majority was already waiting in the wings. All it needed was the sanction of government and the

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\* 'The Prime Minister had decided to allow the Governor-General to take the spotlight so that he could also take the rap.'<sup>12</sup>

blessing of religion to define it as Sinhala and Buddhist. And those it had found by 1958. What Sinhala communalism was still to find, though, before it took on the dimensions of racism, was its institutionalisation in the apparatuses – legislative, executive and judicial – of the state. And that was to come in the ‘reign’ of the two SLFP governments, 1960-65 and 1970-77, and more particularly in the second, which was a coalition of the SLFP, LSSP and CP known as the United Front. But in between, both the UNP and the SLFP (and its allies), depending on which party was in opposition at the time kept up a barrage of Sinhala-Buddhist propaganda to bring down the other’s government, and ‘communalised’ the electorate in the process.

The response of the Federal Party (and the tainted Tamil Congress) to the growing state racism – right up to 1972 when a new constitution put paid to their middle-class hopes of being accommodated as equals within a Sinhala polity – was to run from one party to another with parliamentary power deals, ‘committing’ *satyagraha* when repulsed.

In March 1960, the Federal Party tried to make a deal with a hung UNP government to keep it in power, but the FP’s demands were too close to the B-C Pact for UNP comfort. The FP then hawked its fifteen MPs to the SLFP, to bring down the UNP government, for the same price, and was accepted. But when the SLFP was returned to office in the July election with a big enough majority to form its own government, it reneged on its agreement with the FP. At that point, the FP went into *satyagraha* – which on this occasion was widespread enough to paralyse the administration in the Tamil districts. The government sent in the troops and, when the FP retaliated with its own postal service and stamps, subjected Jaffna to its first reign of army brutality.

The parliamentary power game was over, certainly as far as the SLFP was concerned. The UNP, runners-up as always in the communal stakes, might still need to make overtures to the FP to form a government, but the SLFP had drawn the LSSP and CP closer to its bosom with its mock socialist policies. Bandaranaike had already nationalised transport and the handling of cargo in the docks. His widow took over petrol stations, mission schools, one bank (the Bank of Ceylon) and insurance. This, and the offer of three ministries in her cabinet (albeit in the dying days of her government), endeared her to the revolutionary marxists of the LSSP who promptly abandoned ‘parity’ for power. (The CP, even without the blandishments of power, had given up its ‘principled stand’ on parity of status for the two languages two years earlier, in 1962.)

Virtually the first act of the SLFP/LSSP coalition was to formulate a plan to repatriate the (disfranchised) plantation workers. For sixteen years they had remained stateless and voteless, but so long as India had refused to have them ‘back’, they could at least stay on in the

country of their birth. But now a tidy agreement had been planned between the two governments (in the 'Sirimavo-Shastri Pact') to repatriate the many by giving citizenship to the few.\* And the 'marxists', who had once found their way to State Council and parliament through the votes of the plantation workers, were now a party to their evacuation. The LSSP even agreed to Mrs Bandaranaike putting them, when citizenised (plus those who were already citizens), on a separate (communal) electoral register.\*\* If Mrs Bandaranaike could not get the urban working class on her side, she could at least get its leaders to do her bidding.

It was little wonder, then, that when the next government – a UNP concoction of several parties including the FP, the TC and Philip Gunawardene (ex-marxist, ex-SLFP minister) – announced the introduction of regulations for 'the reasonable use of Tamil', based on Bandaranaike's Tamil Language Act of 1958, the SLFP should get its new-found partners, the LSSP and CP, to join its viciously communal anti-government demonstrations by bringing out their unions on strike.

The communalisation of the Sinhala working class was well-nigh complete. A few unions still remained untainted by the communal leadership of the marxist left – such as the Ceylon Mercantile Union under Bala Tampoe and those within the Ceylon Trade Union Federation under Sanmugathan. But they were both Tamils and, though politically active in their different parties, were careful not to intrude 'the national question' into trade union politics.\*\*\* All that remained now was for the LSSP and CP to help formulate policies that would be repressive of the Tamil people and of the working class alike. And that was to come with their ascent to power with the SLFP in the United Front (UF) government of 1970-77.

But by now, the economy was in a sorry mess. Successive governments had squandered whatever sterling assets had accrued to them during the war years. Foreign exchange earnings from tea, rubber and coconut, which constituted 90 per cent of the country's exports, had fallen with the fall in world prices. Two-thirds of those earnings went

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\* Under this agreement, 525,000 plantation workers were to be repatriated to India and 300,000 given Ceylonese citizenship over a period of fifteen years.

\*\* As a consequence, the Ceylon Workers Congress, the most powerful trade union among the plantation workers, led by S. Thondaman, went over to the UNP for the first time since 1947, and a UNP government repudiated the policy of a special register a couple of years later.

\*\*\* Sanmugathan, in fact, had remained in the CP when the party betrayed its stand on parity (1962) – and it was only over the Sino-Soviet rift in 1963 that he broke away to form the pro-Chinese Ceylon Communist Party (CCP), taking the CTUF with him. And at that point, the CP mounted a scurrilous communal campaign against him to woo back the rank and file.

on imports of essential foodstuffs. And neither the UNP's agricultural policies, from colonisation schemes to 'green revolution' (1965-70), nor the SLFP's import-substitution and nationalisation schemes had produced either self-sufficiency in food or industrial take-off. Instead, the former had made for few rural capitalists and a number of small peasant cultivators and the latter for a new *mudalali* (entrepreneur) class and an expanding public sector. Both sets of policies favoured the Sinhala-Buddhists in the rural areas, but left out of the reckoning their children who, raised on free education and populist rhetoric, demanded jobs and socialism.\* And when the UF government failed to produce on the one and reneged on the other, the Sinhala youth rose up in armed rebellion. They had organised themselves secretly into a close-knit revolutionary party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP – People's Liberation Front), five years earlier, and it now needed the concerted efforts of several governments to help the UF put down the insurrection. When it finally succeeded, it did so with ruthless efficiency, wiping out some 8,000 youths\*\* without socialist qualm or populist tear from the population figures of the country, and detaining 14,000 more.

The insurrection occurred in April 1971, but for the rest of its term of office, which the UF, with 125 out of 151 seats in parliament, extended with impunity to 1977, the government governed under emergency regulations – curbing civil rights, inhibiting judicial independence, muzzling the press, banning strikes in essential services (which covered everything from the manufacture of ice to the supply of water) and prohibiting political activity. And it used these regulations to put Tamil student militants in detention, where some of them came into contact with JVP detainees for the first time. (The JVP, based in the Sinhala-Buddhist heartland, had not addressed itself to the 'Tamil question' except to point to the threat of 'Indian expansionism' with which they sometimes identified the estate workers.)

In 1972, the government introduced a new constitution making the National State Assembly, 'the supreme instrument of state power' (legislative, executive, judicial), and registering Sri Lanka as a

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\* Over 14 per cent of the population (of 12 million) were unemployed. Of these, over 70 per cent were in the rural areas and aged between 19-25, nearly all of them educated to secondary school level.

\*\* This is the figure given in *Nouvel Observateur* (23 May 1971) by René Dumont, who was in Ceylon during the insurrection. Others have put it higher, but exact figures are hard to come by as the UF government's Emergency Regulations of March 1971 authorised police officers 'to take all such measures as may be necessary for the taking possession and burial or cremation of any dead body' without having to account in any way before the law. It was a regulation that was to be renewed by President Jayewardene in 1983.<sup>14</sup>

Buddhist state with Sinhala as its official language.\*

A press bill followed, bringing the 'capitalist press' under government control.\*\* Since Radio Ceylon was already a state corporation, the national media was now virtually in government hands. As for local government elections, they just dropped out of sight.

While the UF government was putting its political house in order, its Finance Minister, Dr. N.M. Perera, was running back and forth from Washington trying to get the IMF to give him a socialist loan or two. Nationalisation was proving to be costly and import-substitution looked as though it still needed foreign assistance – by way of machinery and plant and some raw material even. But these were schemes which, apart from being 'socialist' and, more importantly, seen to be such, were helping to create a truly indigenous class of capitalists to serve the country and a fine up-standing state bureaucracy to serve the people. And, of course, you couldn't have the one without the other. To do business you needed quotas, licenses, permits, bank credit (that's why they nationalised the banks) – and that's where state patronage came in – and the state bureaucracy to channel that patronage. And the bureaucrats themselves were state appointees. But that's what planning is all about. And planning is socialism.

If this Trotskyite version of socialism brought a blush to Muscovite cheeks, it also gratified the populism of the SLFP – for a while. For the expanding public sector had opened up avenues of employment for the Sinhala rural youth from whose ranks the JVP insurgents had sprung. But to make sure that they could find room at the top, the government introduced standardisation schemes in education, whereby weightage was to be given to rural youth as against their urban counterparts – a sort of positive discrimination/affirmative action for the disadvantaged. That at least was the ostensible purpose behind district-wise standardisation, and since urban schools had better equipment, science facilities, teachers, etc., it appeared to be a justifiable one and not aimed specifically at Tamils in Jaffna schools.\*\*\* But prompted by Sinhala-Buddhist agitation and JVP insurgency, the government also introduced a media-wise standardisation scheme which was a method of adjusting examination marks between the two language media so

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\* The chief architect of this constitution was another 'revolutionary marxist', Dr Colvin R. de Silva (who appears later in these pages in the guise of the Minister of Plantation Industries).

\*\* This was directed at Associated Newspapers, whose owners had for decades virtually told the nation what to think and how to vote – and had earlier mounted a filthy campaign against Mrs Bandaranaike personally at the elections. Government control was, among other things, short-sighted, as it was bound to serve the interests of the UNP, the press' class allies, when the government changed.

\*\*\* But, since districts included towns, this weightage system did not act in favour of the rural areas either.<sup>15</sup>

that those sitting in the Sinhala medium needed fewer marks to get into university than those sitting in the Tamil medium.

The effect on the Tamils was momentous. Standardisation wiped out at a stroke the meagre opportunities that education had held out for the up-country Tamils, and for the Tamils in the North and East it put paid to all ambition and hope. Already their language had been taken from them, and with that their access to government jobs. And then this government had narrowed it further with a chit system which gave jobs only to political appointees; but then, there was no public sector development at all in the North and East. Trade too had gone into Sinhala hands with the government's entry into the import and retail business. But the Tamils had continued through education to make it to the professions. Now that also was taken from them. Language and learning – these were their land, their livelihood, their legacy, their sense of civilisation. They had not built great tanks and irrigation schemes or even managed to industrialise their homelands, but they had written poems, played plays and sung such songs – literature was their art form – and music. Language had lent itself to the first, the harshness of work to the second. And now it was all taken from them – and had made a bleak land bleaker still.

In January 1974, the Tamils held a congress in Jaffna to celebrate their Tamil language and Tamil culture. Tamil poets, philosophers, scholars and artists came from all over the Tamil-speaking world to be present at the occasion. Mrs Bandaranaike opposed the idea of the conference but could not in the glare of such publicity forbid it. But Mayor Duraiyappah, the SLFP's Tamil stooge, got the message and cleared out of town, leaving the police a free hand. And on the last day of the conference, with the conference spilling over from Veerasingham Hall on to the esplanade outside to make itself available to the thousands assembled there, the police on the pretext of an unwarranted public meeting charged into the crowd with tear gas and baton, bringing down the electric pylons and killing nine people in the process.

The youth were stunned. The government held out no comforting hand or apology. The Tamil United Front – a consortium of Tamil bourgeois parties (the FP, the TC and the CWC)\* – provoked into unity by the Sinhala-Buddhist Constitution of 1972, indulged in its customary rhetoric and did nothing. And the youth took it upon themselves to take on the Sinhala state. A series of bank robberies followed and as the police, put beyond the reach of law by emergency

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\* The Tamil leaders of these parties were plantation owners and employers of Indian Tamil estate workers. 'G.G. Ponnambalam (TC) was the owner of Sri Niwasa estate at Waga, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam (FP) was the owner of an estate in Maskeliya and Thondaman (CWC) was the owner of Wavenden estate in Pusellawa and Medegoda estate in Dolosbage.'<sup>16</sup>

law, stepped up their operations, the youth organised themselves into the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) and elected to shoot down the arrogant and strutting symbol of Sinhala state power in Jaffna, Alfred Duraiyappah. It was a slap in the face for the government, who promptly arrested and detained and tortured over a hundred young people at random and then proceeded to erect a statue to Duraiyappah in the heart of Jaffna town. (The imperial lesson had not been unlearnt even by the marxists in the government.)

The state repression that followed Duraiyappah's killing drove the burgeoning movement underground, where it began to ponder the tenets and practice of marxism. Already, the activities of Sanmugathan's CCP in leading the depressed castes' temple entry movement in Jaffna in the latter part of the 1960s were fresh in their minds, and from their teachers they had learnt of the Jaffna Youth League and the once progressive policies of the LSSP and CP. But they were also immersed in the nationalist rhetoric of the FP and the TC who, like their Sinhala counterparts, kept harking back to a glorious past when the Tamils had their own kingdom. It was a powerful argument for a people bereft of dignity and belonging and particularly for the young who, in addition, were bereft of a future – and met at the same time the marxist requirements for nation-hood. The marxists themselves – those outside parliament that is – had substituted rote learning for concrete investigation and shoved it all back to the Tamil youth for resolution under the rubric of the national question. And this uneasy mating of bourgeois historicism with historical materialism has continued to plague the theory and practice of Tamil revolutionaries even today.

Meanwhile, in 1975, the government socialists (there used to be government Christians under the British) achieved the summit of their nationalisation policies by taking over the plantations (which were losing money anyway) and paying compensation to their foreign owners. Three years earlier, the government had taken over private land in excess of twenty-five acres (paddy) and fifty (other produce). Some of the land so recaptured was alienated to the Sinhala peasantry (Mrs Bandaranaike was reversing the betrayal of her Radala fore-fathers when they sold out the Kandyan people to the British, taking some of their common land as payment). Other land was turned over to cooperatives under the aegis of MPs. Together, these measures dispossessed a whole host of plantation workers of their livelihood and reduced them to destitution and death on the roads of Nawalapitiya and Gampola and Hatton.\*

But even as the UF reached its socialist summit, its constituent parts

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\* The Minister of Plantation Industries was the Trotskyite Colvin R. de Silva, the Constitution-maker of 1972.

fell to bickering over who should take the credit for the ascent, the LSSP or the SLFP, and whose constituency should benefit by it – and Mrs Bandaranaike promptly settled the argument by dismissing the LSSP from the coalition. The CP followed somewhat (a year and a half in fact) later – and parliament was dissolved soon afterwards.

In July 1977, the UNP swept into power, with 140 out of 168 seats. The LSSP and CP won not one, the SLFP eight. The Tamil United Liberation Front, who had added Liberation (TULF) to Unity (TUF) in its 1976 Conference in order to keep up with ‘the boys’ and now stood for the separate state of Eelam, won eighteen seats and became the main opposition party – and its leader, Amirthalingam became the official leader of the alternative government of the Sinhala state!

State capitalism was over, but it had left in its wake a detritus of broken promises, half-baked industrial schemes, bits and pieces of land reform, rising prices, debt and corruption. And it had created a Sinhala-Buddhist state-class, institutionalised (and constitutionalised) racism and re-created the culture of racial superiority. The Tamils were a people apart, Jaffna another country, without benefit of employment or education or economic advancement, separate – except for central control. And even that control was no longer through representative local government (local elections had ceased in 1971) but through appointees of the state and its police force and, occasionally, the army. The army was by now almost all Sinhalese (it boasted a whole regiment of them called Sinha Regiment), though the navy and the air force still had a sprinkling of Tamils, mostly in the upper echelons, and the police was fast becoming a force of Sinhalese only, but again with willing Tamils in the higher ranks. It would not be long before there was one government (civil) for the Sinhalese and another (military) for the Tamils.

In education, the state’s policy of separate development created not only a Sinhala ‘stream’ and a Tamil ‘stream’ (so that nation shall not speak unto nation!) and made the one superior to the other through ‘standardisation’,\* but also carried on the theme of Arya-Sinhala racial superiority into Sinhala textbooks. Tamils (let alone other communities) seldom appeared in these books and when they did it was as invaders or immigrants. In the meticulous phraseology of the Council for Communal Harmony through the Media (CCHM), ‘not only do the Sinhala readers continue to maintain their monocultural character in these grades [3 - 9]; they also project an image of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity which is defined fundamentally through opposition to and

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\* Sri Lanka must be the only country in the world where such affirmative action is used to safeguard the interests of the majority on the ground that they are a minority – in the world; but, then, so are the Chinese.



struggle against Tamil invaders in past history'. By contrast, the Tamil readers issued by the same government department were all multi-cultural in their content and contained 'material presenting relations of friendship between Tamil children on the one hand and both Sinhala and Muslim children on the other'.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the racist thinking behind this policy – and the readers, published under the last government, continue to be reprinted under this – it should certainly help to produce a generation of small-minded, insular Sinhala nazis.

If this is one waste of human potential, there is yet another in the plantation areas, where institutionalised racism first raised its head and now thrives on 'benign neglect' – with no schools worth speaking of, no books, no equipment, not enough teachers. 'What goes by the name of the *Maha Vidyalaya* (high school) at Welimada', mourns Gnanamuttu, 'consists of two half-walled buildings. The senior section of the school ... is a few feet below the main road. It has to compete with a bi-weekly fair with its dust, its noise and its smells. The junior section with its half-walls are dangerously near the river, which in January 1975 invaded the school and carried away its furniture...'<sup>18</sup>

If the culture of racism was being bred in the schools, it was disseminated through the Sinhala media and reproduced in the singularly Sinhala-Buddhist activities of the Ministry of Culture. The 'independent' press, still (by and large) anti-SLFP and anti-Left, was confidently Sinhala-Buddhist rather than overtly racist, but the North and the East of the country may well not have existed for all the coverage they got in these papers. The state-controlled radio was rarely impartial in its reporting of events (in the Sinhala medium) and its interpretation of events, if not the reports themselves, often diverged as between the Sinhala and English programmes. The Sinhala music it broadcast was, perhaps inevitably, (given the 'culture' of the times) narrowly nationalist: where Somapala and Chitra once sang meaningless love lyrics, Nanda Malini Gokula's mellifluous voice now conveyed the message of the Lion Race in the nursery songs that a mother sang to her child as she put him to sleep.

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs, for its part, saw Sri Lankan culture as wholly Sinhala-Buddhist. And nowhere was this clearer than in the plethora of art exhibitions, music festivals, folk dance and drama that it assembled for the Non-Aligned Conference in 1976. Or look at the Sri Lanka Year Book for, say, 1975, under Fine Arts and Cultural Activities and see whether you can find one mention of Tamil art or craft, never mind 'culture'.

It was, however, in the 'commanding heights of the economy' that state racism held sway. Between them, nationalisation and import-substitution and government control of the import-export business had 'corporatised' and bureaucratised virtually every avenue of economic activity. And since state corporations were invariably situated in

Sinhala areas for the benefit of Sinhala voters, and appointments both to them and to the state bureaucracy were made on the basis of political patronage, Tamils could rarely find employment in the public sector. If they tried their hand at trade, their path was blocked not only by the need to get quotas, permits and licences, which were generally available only to political favourites, but also by government cooperatives which now handled almost all of the import and retail business, from rice and flour to toothbrushes and toys, both in the villages and in the towns. If they tried industry, hopefully under the aegis of the government's protectionist policies, they found they had little or no access to credit facilities. 'The local credit market', as Newton Gunasinghe has pointed out in his brilliant essay on the economics of racism (though he doesn't call it that), was 'dominated by the two state banks. The directors of these were also persons appointed on the basis of political patronage and were closely linked to the political parties in power. Given this situation, the same conditions that applied to the issuance of quotas, permits and licences applied to the granting of bank credit. Here too, Sinhala entrepreneurs linked to the ruling political party stood to gain, whereas Tamil entrepreneurs, especially the middle-level ones who enjoyed no upper-class social status and lacked political patronage, did not enjoy any specific advantage.'<sup>19</sup> And even those Tamils who did manage, by virtue of their class, to enjoy political patronage – and they were never more than a handful – seldom extended their enterprise to the Tamil areas.

If colonial capitalism had failed to penetrate the North and East, neither state capitalism nor the private enterprise that grew in its shadow made any impact on them either. But then, the driving force of under-developed state capitalism is not economic but political and ideological. The politics is the politics of achieving and keeping power, the ideology that of reinforcing and substantiating that politics. The vehicle for the first is (initially) social democracy, the basis for the second the culture of a soured nationalism which failed to take on colonial capitalism and therein find its progressive dynamic. Where that culture is not homogeneous (what culture is?) and falls neatly into communal categories, themselves the result of differential social formations, it is these categories that are exploited to achieve political power. The process of maintaining – and reproducing – that power, however, wins for one community economic (and political) dominance over all others and alters the relationship between them from the horizontal to the vertical, in a hierarchy of power. When that hierarchy then becomes institutionalised in the apparatuses of the state, accepted by civil society and authenticated by ideologies of racial superiority and/or historical primacy, communalism takes on the dimensions and class connotations of racism.<sup>20</sup>

To put it differently. Communalism implies a parallel relationship

between (communal) groups, antagonistic perhaps but not necessarily unequal; racism connotes a hierarchical relationship of power, institutionalised in the state apparatus. Communal violence, therefore, refers to that which occurs between (communal) groups, not to that inflicted on one group by the state, representing another. Hence, the use of the term (communal) 'riots', when what is meant – or should be – is state pogroms.\* This is not just a euphemism but a violent distortion of the truth – which further adds to the pretended innocence of the state. Communalism is an 'afraid' word.

Communalism is also a portmanteau word: it takes in all the dirty linen of religion, language, culture, 'ethnicity'. And it is a flat word, one-dimensional – gives no idea of the dynamics of relationships within a community or between communities.

Above all, communalism, like ethnicity, is a pluralist word in a class world. They both describe, but don't tell – are historicist rather than historical. Worse, they pretend that society is all vertical; differentiated by 'ethnic' or communal groups and not by class, or, if by class, only as a sub-division of ethnicity or at best 'linked' to it. And this is not just a distortion of reality, but an acceptance of it – a prelude either to side-tracking it into 'group conflict' or abstracting it into 'the national question'.

Communal categories belong to the period of colonial capitalism, when they were disinterred from their social formations to serve British rule. They came to maturity in the decades before independence in what Bipan Chandra has called a 'vicarious nationalism'<sup>21</sup> – which, in the years following, impregnated the body politic, to give birth to state racism.\*\* And it is that racism which is today growing into fascism.

### **From racism to fascism**

The UNP came to power in 1977 with the best of capitalist intentions – or so it seemed from their manifesto. They were going to get rid of all that stuffy state corporation business and let the clean air of free enterprise blow through their open economy. They were going to do away with racism and corruption because these things fouled up the capitalist works. They would restore the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of the press. They would not only maintain existing welfare programmes such as subsidised food and free educational and medical services – for that, after all, was the tradition

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\* The Centre for Society and Religion, which prides itself on its work for social justice, but retreats into pietism on race matters, calls them 'communal disturbances'. Others, mainly academics (both Tamil and Sinhala), talk of 'inter-ethnic hostility', 'ethnic disharmony', etc.

\*\* Its bastard child was already in existence in the plantations.

of the country – but even increase the weekly rice ration. They understood that the demand of the ‘Tamil-speaking people’ for a separate state arose from ‘the lack of a solution to their problems’ and promised an early all-party conference that would ‘take all possible steps to remedy the grievances in such fields as (1) Education (2) Colonisation (3) Use of Tamil language (4) Employment in the Public and semi-Public Corporations’. They aimed, above all, to create a ‘just and free society’ through righteous (*dharmista*) government.<sup>22</sup>

Within two weeks of taking office, the *dharmista* government stood by and watched while its police burnt down the Jaffna market – because they had been refused free entry into the city’s carnival! Police arrogance and brutality had become the norm in Jaffna under the UF government, but the UNP’s readiness to turn a blind eye to police conduct now boosted their confidence. As the anti-Tamil violence, fired by rumour, was taken up by Sinhala mobs and spread to other parts of the country, the police not only did nothing but helped to fuel the rumours. The government contented itself with clapping on curfews which were broken – under police supervision. The Prime Minister, J.R. Jayewardene, refused to declare a state of emergency because it was ‘contrary to democratic principles’ – and for two weeks a reign of terror was unleashed on the Tamils. They were beaten, maimed, stabbed and killed in their hundreds, their children terrorised, their shops and houses looted and burnt. In Colombo alone, there were over 35,000 refugees crowded into six schools with bad sanitation, little food and less medical help – and threats of being bombed out of the camps as well – before being packed off, finally, to Jaffna by train and ship and plane.

But it was the plantation workers who suffered most. Their line-rooms were burnt, their possessions looted, the men beaten, the women gang-raped. And they ended up in transit camps. Transit to where, though? Jaffna? But Jaffna was not their home.<sup>23</sup>

This was the first time that the ‘plantation Tamils’ had been subjected to mob violence, but then they had already been violated by successive governments for thirty years and left prey to attack. Sinhala-Buddhist ideology had long held them responsible for taking Sinhala land, but another strand had been added to it in recent years which held them responsible for taking Sinhala jobs – and the originator of this thinking had now arrived in the inner ranks of the cabinet.

This was the first time, too, that the police force had so openly connived at assault and arson and looting, but they had been given a free hand against the JVP in 1971 and against the Tamils ever since – with guarantee of absolution. The UNP could do no less.\*

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\* Five years later, with proceedings still pending in the courts, the UNP passed an act indemnifying ministers, public officers, members of the security forces and members

It was a bad start for Jayewardene capitalism, but the IMF and World Bank rallied to his side – in exchange for devaluation, ‘rationalisation’ of food subsidies and cuts in the welfare programmes. A western aid consortium followed with added help to establish a Free Trade Zone and develop Colombo as a commercial and tourist centre. But the project above all which, according to the Finance Minister, had won the unequivocal support of the IMF and World Bank and ‘captured the imagination of the Aid-Group countries’ was the harnessing of the waters of the Mahaveli River to generate hydro-electric power and open out land in the Dry Zone. And it was not difficult to see why: if investors in the FTZ needed power, it would not be long before agribusiness needed land – and the day of the FTZs was fast receding, anyway.

But whatever the specific needs of the various projects, the overall requirement was ‘political stability’. That stability was assured in September 1978 by a new constitution (pushed through parliament in three weeks) which concentrated executive power in the hands of a President (elected directly), weakened parliament by making it responsible to him or her but not vice versa, and ushered in proportional representation as the basis for all future elections – thereby ensuring that no other party could ever again find the two-thirds majority necessary to play around with the constitution as the UNP could. And if investors needed further reassurance, Article 157 stipulated that no future government could revoke or alter any treaty or agreement entered into – on the basis of a two-thirds majority in parliament – with a foreign state or ‘its nationals ... corporations, companies and other associations’ for the ‘promotion and protection of their investments’.

But all these constitutional provisos could not safeguard, let alone attract, foreign investment if it was constantly being threatened by labour problems and civil strife. The unions could be brought into line with an Essential Services Act (like that of the UF), and their membership, in any case, was moving from the ranks of the defeated parties to the UNP’s union, the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS), under Mathew, the Minister of Industries. As for the left-wing disorder of the JVP, their fangs had been drawn by the release of their leaders from jail and into electoral politics.<sup>25</sup> But there was still ‘the Tamil problem’. The pogroms of 1977 and the detentions and torture that followed had served only to increase the militancy of the Tamil youth and their uncompromising commitment to fight the Sinhala state. Only a few months earlier, they had killed the notorious torturer and traitor, Inspector Bastiampillai, and set up the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

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acting under their authority in respect of acts committed during the communal disturbances of August 1977 ‘with a view to restoring law and order’.<sup>24</sup>

(LTTE). The President had proscribed them, but now he was holding out a palliative by offering in the constitution the status of a national language for Tamil. And though that status was not quite defined, he hoped perhaps that it would count as a step in the right direction and a sign of his resolve to tackle the 'Tamil question'.\*

But the President reckoned without the racists in his government who kept up a constant barrage of anti-Tamil propaganda within parliament and out. Mathew, the Minister of Industries, made a dramatic 'exposure' in the House of the way Tamil examiners were cheating in the marking of 'A' level Tamil medium papers to the detriment of Sinhala students. The charge was never investigated officially, (despite demands by the university teachers both Sinhala and Tamil), but Mathew had found another platform – and a privileged one at that – to broadcast his poisonous views. And if that was not enough, he made use of the government press to publish and distribute free of charge a book of his accusations with a preface by a *bhikku* in Sinhala and English. De Alwis, the Minister of State, sang the praises of the priests who had set out once again from their *viharas* and their temples to save Buddhism from the marauding Tamils. 'But for the venerable monks', he pointed out, 'there would be no Sinhala race ... no Buddhism ... no culture known as the culture of Sri Lanka.'<sup>26</sup>

The government-controlled press picked up the racist themes and launched its own campaigns against the Tamils, highlighting racially inflammatory stories and giving different versions of events in the different language papers. Anything that happened in the North, from bank robbery to common assault, was described as terrorism. There was no news of Jaffna except sensational news – no ordinary people there leading ordinary lives – and a culture was growing up in the South which viewed all Tamils, including the TULF!, as terrorists. And again, it was Mathew and his cohorts who, having helped to orchestrate the definition, now provided the solution: 'Terrorists have to be killed because they are terrorists. They are like mad dogs and no better than that.'<sup>27</sup>

The government was setting itself up for an armed confrontation with the Tamil youth. And when, in July 1979, a Tamil police inspector was shot dead in Jaffna, the President clamped down a state of emergency in Jaffna District and sent in Sinhala troops, under Brigadier Weeratunga, with orders to wipe out terrorism within six months. The combined police and army operations, under emergency laws and then under an even more horrendous Prevention of Terrorism

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\* With the inauguration of the new constitution, the President raised Thondaman, the leader of the plantation workers and president of their biggest union, the CWC, to cabinet rank. Another (UNP) Tamil, Devanayagam, was already Minister of Justice!

Act\* (which combined the worst features of both the British and South African Acts), resulted in the mutilation and murder of three youths, the disappearance of three others,\*\* the detention and torture of several people and the terrorisation of the whole population.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of the six months, the spectre of terrorism that Mathew and Co. had summoned up and the President had sent troops to 'wipe out' had been made flesh by the army – and provoked the counter-violence of the Tamil youth. From now on, it was war against the state and its occupying army. If the UF's economic policies had made the Tamils a separate people, the UNP's political tactics were making them a separate nation.

It was a politics, however, that ran against the grain of an open economy which, of nature, lets a thousand capitalist flowers bloom. The top level entrepreneurs (Sinhala and Tamil), as Newton Gunasinghe points out, could now unfold into their next phase of expansion and make it to the export markets through joint ventures with foreign capital.<sup>29</sup> But the middle entrepreneurs, who had thrived in the hot house of state protection to produce their import-substitution goods, were pushed out into the cold by foreign imports. The effect of liberalising trade, however, and setting it free of government cooperatives was to give the middle level Tamil entrepreneurs, who had not been cosseted by the state, an edge over their Sinhala counterparts.\*\*\*

Jobs, too, were becoming less difficult for Tamils to get with the growth of trade and commerce, tourism and the service sector – areas in which proficiency in the Sinhala language was not particularly advantageous. For the poorer classes, both Sinhala and Tamil, migration to the oil-rich Middle East was opening up a veritable eldorado of instant riches and consumer culture.

But none of these developments went North and East. If it was indeed capitalism that was flourishing in the rest of the country, it was making no headway in the Tamil areas. The Tamil youth were still trapped in a racist educational system and denied economic mobility. Tamil land in the North, where it was not being state-settled by Sinhala colonists, was not going to be irrigated by the Mahaveli project either. The small market-gardener in Jaffna who produced cash crops like onions and chillies and potatoes was hit by the imports of these commodities from India and Pakistan. Tamil industry did not have

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\* The Minister of Justice, under whom the Act was passed, was Devenayagam, a Tamil.

\*\* These were youths who were arrested by the police on 14 July (before Brigadier Weeratunga arrived in Jaffna). The bodies of two of them were found mutilated, one died later in hospital and the bodies of three others were never found.

\*\*\* It was no accident, therefore, that Tamil businesses in Colombo were marked out for attack by the planners of the July 1983 pogroms (see other articles in this issue).

government blessing or blandishment to inveigle foreign capital. The Trincomalee port in the East might still gain some attention from imperial interests but, for that very reason, would remain an exclusive concern of the Sinhala state. Whatever tourist industry there was on the east coast – and the Tourist Board which gave out the licences was run by De Alwis – was in Sinhala hands. And even where the Mahaveli might still reach out to the predominantly Tamil district of Batticaloa, Sinhala colonists would be brought in to reap its benefits.

What under-developed capitalism could not develop, state racism had to contain. And when the resistance to that racism reached, of necessity, the proportions of armed struggle, the containment policies of the state would seek a military solution.

That, however, was not going to guarantee the political stability that Jayewardene had promised the IMF and the World Bank. And now that he, deft wielder of carrot and stick that he thought he was, had done his stick bit by sending the army ‘to wipe out the menace of terrorism in six months’, he would do the thing with the carrot by offering the Tamils a chance to run their own local affairs through the District Development Councils (DDCs).\*

The TULF was prepared to go along with the President and participate in the elections to the DDCs in the North and East in June 1981, but the Tigers,\*\* whose number and variety had grown through state repression, denounced them and the TULF. Since 1979, the war between the Sinhala state and the Tamil youth had escalated. Armed with guns they had taken from the enemy and moving about on bicycles through *olungais* (labyrinthine lanes) that ran into other *olungais*, losing the pursuing police or army and their cumbrous vehicles in the process,\*\*\* they had become adept at bank raids and ambushes and, in March 1981, had pulled off a daring robbery of the state bank in Neervelli (Jaffna). The arrests, detentions and tortures that followed have been recorded elsewhere in this journal and by Amnesty International, but the effect of them was to turn the North into a cauldron of resistance.

Despite that, however, the President decided to go ahead with the elections to the DDCs. It was no longer a matter of ‘concessions’ but of will: he was determined to show the Tamils that not everyone wanted Eelam, even if he had to force them to vote. Accordingly, he put up

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\* DDCs were introduced by the Jayewardene government as a form of local administration with central (ministerial) control.

\*\* The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who grew out of the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), were the first group to take up armed struggle. Other groups have sprung up since then but, whatever their temporary differences, they all are, as far as the Tamil people are concerned, their common liberators. And it is in that generic sense that the term is used here.

\*\*\* The government was at one stage to propose the banning of bicycles in Jaffna.<sup>30</sup>



UNP candidates and sent in a special contingent of police to supervise the elections – followed by ministers Mathew and Dissanayake. A (Tamil) UNP candidate was assassinated, a policeman killed and the police and the army went on the rampage – burning looting and killing – burning down this time the Jaffna Library as well and its monumental collection of books and manuscripts. Unable to wipe out a people, they were driven to destroy their heritage.\* The barbarians had arrived – under one guise or another.

The elections still went ahead, but not all the rigging and the tampering could yield up one UNP seat in the North. The TULF won them all. And the government brought in a motion of no confidence in the TULF leader – on the grounds that he had slandered Sri Lanka abroad – and slandered the Tamil people instead in the House and in the press, inciting violence against the Tamils in the South and East and, once more, on the plantations. But this time, the attacks on the estate workers, carried out by private armies – in government buses – had all the hall-marks of politicians in high places. And so horrendous was the mayhem and the murder visited on these defenceless people that it even moved the President to cry out, ‘what sort of animals are these?’ But a few months later, the army was moving into the estate workers’ squatter settlements in Vavuniya, where they had been driven by previous pogroms, and taking away for questioning the Gandhiyam volunteers who had helped them resettle – on the pretext that they (the volunteers) were ‘terrorists’.\*\* Once again, the most abysmally poor and exploited section of the Tamil people had been chosen for a dry run for the planning of pogroms yet to come.

Jayewardene was caught up in the vortex of his own manipulations, an uncertain accomplice now of the forces he himself had unleashed. Neither the imperatives of a capitalist economy which required the dismantling of institutional racism nor the concentration of political power in one party and one man which made that dismantling possible had guided government policies. But then, the very forces that brought the government to power and gave it such a massive majority were also those that kept the government from according the Tamil people their basic rights. Those forces were now represented in the cabinet itself and given access to state power. The Minister of Industry and Scientific

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\* In the entire catalogue of carnage, arson, pillage and murder ...’, wrote Ian Goonetilleke, the doyen of Sri Lankan librarians and bibliophiles, ‘the complete destruction by an act of calculated and cold-blooded incendiarism of the splendid Jaffna Public Library is the most wounding to the sensibility of our brethren in the North, and must outrage the human feelings of every person in the land, whatever his political, racial or religious persuasion.’<sup>31</sup>

\*\* Gandhiyam was a charity set up in 1976 by Tamils as a community and social service. It mainly helped settle plantation Tamil refugees who fled from the hill country in 1977 and 1981.

Affairs, the Minister of Lands and Mahaveli Development and the Minister of State were all self-avowed Sinhala supremacists, and the first two had a close working relationship with the Buddhist clergy who, like the Associated Newspapers of an earlier period, were now become king-makers.

The contradictions between the economics of capitalism and the politics of racism were thus epitomised within the cabinet itself – and pointed the way to the authoritarian state. Already in the various confrontations that the government had had with the unions, the UNP's JSS had been used, either as an unofficial army of thugs or as an official government union, to beat up or counter-demonstrate against the striking workers. In July 1980, a general strike brought about by soaring inflation, rising food prices, welfare cuts and repressive trade union legislation, such as the Essential Services Act, had been crushed by the JSS at the cost of a worker's life and followed up by the government's sacking of some 80,000 workers. Protests and demonstrations by university students had been settled with summary violence and the same goon squads had disrupted public meetings that had anything to say against the government.

Now, with the economy in a mess and the aid-givers worried about 'political stability', the government decided to kow-tow to the IMF further. The FTZ had not been a success: Sri Lanka had clearly come in at the fag-end of the multinationals' 'putting-out' system in the micro-electronics and garment industries.\* Joint venture investments outside the FTZ had served more to open up the domestic market for foreign investors than the foreign market for domestic entrepreneurs. The Mahaveli project was becoming increasingly costly and the funds for its various sub-projects not readily available. But it still held out the one real attraction – for agri-business. The Minister of Lands had made no bones about it when he announced in March 1981 the government's intention 'to ask for all forms of agricultural and agro-based industrial investment', and pointed to Guthries' proposed lease of 28,000 acres for palm oil production.\*\* This would, however, take the government away from its stated plans for immediate self-sufficiency in food and add to the disgruntlement of the peasantry. There was also the possibility of leasing out Trincomalee as a naval base to the USA – and the Reagan administration is certainly keen to firm up its hold in the Indian Ocean – but this again has not found favour with the public.

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\* Technologies in both these fields had advanced so much and so fast that it was becoming more profitable to bring them back home or use the already well-tried assembly lines abroad. The main attraction that Sri Lanka's FTZ offered was its export quota in the garment industry – to those countries like Hong Kong, Korea and Singapore who had used up their export quotas.

\*\*Whether this particular project came off in the end is uncertain, but others are certainly in the pipe-line.

Clearly what was required for economic advancement and the political stability it called for was stronger and longer government. And since the President's stock, the President felt, was higher in the country than his government's, he brought forward the elections to the Presidency to October 1982 by amending the constitution, and won – thanks to the self-annihilating policies of the opposition (from the SLFP to the LSSP and JVP!) who all put up candidates.

The prolongation of parliament was another matter, but there was always the four-fifths majority in the House to amend the constitution yet again and bring in a referendum in lieu of elections to justify the government staying in power. It was essentially a vote asking the voters to give up their right to vote. But this time it was not so much the internecine politics of the opposition that gave the government a victory, but its use of intimidation, impersonation, forgeries, theft (of ballot boxes), assault and every known violation of electoral practice and principle (and some purely Sri Lankan). It was a method of electioneering that had been perfected and legitimated in the Tamil North – but had passed the Sinhala voters by.

Political violence had become an accepted method of government and a culture of violence had now settled on the land. And with it, hand in hand, went a culture of open economy consumerism, Middle East bonanzas and tourist titillations, of greed and selfishness and dog-eat-dog relationships – all of which were paraded and perpetuated by an arse-licking government press. There was no public debate or discussion which did not break into altercation or fisticuffs, no protest or demonstration which was not set upon by hooligans and thugs. Women were not beyond assault, whether they were workers in the garment industries at Ekala or ex-MPs leading a march of women on International Women's Day. And it did not matter that they might be elderly: that respect for the old, which Sri Lankan culture once boasted, was gone. Instead, policemen who carried out such violence were rewarded with promotion and judges who found against them intimidated by goons brought in on government buses to flaunt their thuggery before their justices' homes.

Eminent scholars who voiced their opinions of dissent in public were set upon and beaten – while piddly little sociologists who descended into the lurid investigation of sexual manners or historians who cobbled together books from other people's books or researchers in institutions that produced great tomes of meaningless abstraction which left them safe continued to make it into the upper echelons of academia. The universities themselves had ceased to be places of learning and become the seed-beds of reactionary excellence – and provided the climate for the racial violence that erupted in the Peradeniya University in May 1983, when Sinhala students assaulted and chased Tamil students out of the campus, or a few weeks later in the Colombo Medical Hostel,

when Tamil students were again harassed and beaten up.\*

Real learning was scorned and learned men, doyens of Buddhist education who once upheld the great Buddhist heritage of scholarship and truth, fallen prey to government propaganda and preferments.

And Buddhism itself had ceased to be the great philosophy of *ahimsa* and become the tool of a venal clergy in search of secular power. The influence they once had over the minds and mores of people through their own self-abnegating and disciplined conduct of life, gentle and humane, guiding by precept and example, had in the course of three decades of virulent nationalism been exchanged for financial and political influence – till they were no more than fascist thugs in saffron robes recruiting private armies for primitive politicians, settling Sinhala settlers on Tamil land, pushing the Trojan horse of Buddhist shrines into the North and East, deciding government policy even before it is made – not king-makers any more but kings.

If the police and the army ran the North and the East, the *bhikkus* and the thugs provided law and order in the South.

The pogroms that followed in July and August 1983,\*\* heralded by countless acts of brutality, torture and murder in Jaffna and Vavuniya and Trincomalee and culminating in the merciless state-sponsored killing of helpless Tamils in jail, had for their context and their climate the policies of an authoritarian state, the spurious culture of imported capitalism, the degeneracy of the Sinhala intelligentsia and the decadence of Sinhala-Buddhist society – all of them the product, one way or another, of soured nationalism married to imperial capital, leading to dictatorship. But then, it is a pattern, with variations, that has been set in country after Third World country wherever the IMF and World Bank have set foot.

Against that mounting dictatorship stands only the armed resistance of the Tamil freedom-fighters – and whatever the goal in view, their immediate and inevitable task is to continue their unrelenting war against the fascist state, providing in the process the opportunity for the Sinhala people to mount their own resistance to the racism that corrodes their society and the fascism that thrives on it. Tamil liberation is the easier won through the weakening of the Sinhala state from within, socialism the surer achieved through struggles not narrowly nationalist. There is no socialism after liberation; socialism is the process through which liberation is won.

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\* For the substantiation of all these, see the courageous reports in the *Saturday Review*, *Lanka Guardian* and Civil Rights Movement documents.

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## Sri Lanka's week of shame: an eyewitness account\*

For the second time in my life (the first was during the 1958 communal riots), I had to undergo the indignities associated with being a Tamil in Sri Lanka. This time, it was under the *Dharmista* (Righteousness) government of Junius Richard Jayewardene.

Although communal violence has been frequent in Sri Lanka, it had previously always been contained. But not so, this time. It was a horrifying nightmare – looting, burning, murder on an unimaginable scale. Colombo resembles a bombed city in places – charred and blackened, roofless gaping buildings where prosperous houses, shops and factories once stood. What is dreadful to realise is that the whole operation was planned and carried out with virtually military precision. Tamil and Indian houses, shops and factories had quite clearly been marked out earlier. And although everything took place so quickly and over such a large area, giving the idea of spontaneity, everywhere the pattern was the same. As the BBC is reported to have said: 'The idea seems to have been to destroy the economic base of the Tamils.' It was an attempt at genocide.

Someone seemed to have planned the whole thing and waited only for an opportunity. And the opportunity came on the night of 23 July, at about 11.30 pm, when the so-called terrorists of the North, carrying on an armed struggle for a separate state of Eelam for the Tamils, ambushed and killed thirteen soldiers who were all Sinhalese (the Sri Lankan army is almost entirely Sinhalese). This sparked the fuse.

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\* The identity of the author is being withheld for security reasons as he is in Sri Lanka.

The army had shot and killed two 'terrorists' in the North a week earlier. The Tigers, as the Tamil militant youth call themselves, had been planning a retaliation. They had lured the army out several times on false information. Then, on 23 July 'information' about the whereabouts of some 'terrorists' was fed to the army. Ignoring an order not to go on night patrol, armed soldiers went out in two vehicles. They were easily ambushed. A detonator, which had recently been stolen from the Kankesanturai cement factory, was used to blow up the vehicles. When the soldiers got out, they were shot down from all sides. Thirteen died on the spot, two were wounded.

### *Sunday*

Colombo received the news on Sunday, the 24th. By evening, crowds had gathered at Colombo's main cemetery where, apparently, the government had made an attempt to bury the bodies. Nobody knows why the government decided on this step, instead of returning the bodies to the areas from which the soldiers came. It seems to have had some confused idea of reaping political capital by rousing hatred among the Sinhalese against the 'terrorists'. In any event, a crowd of thousands surrounded the President's house at Ward Place (not his official residence) and demanded the bodies. The crowd was tear-gassed. But the government retreated. That night, a section of this crowd started the communal violence by setting fire to Tamil houses at the Borella end of Rosmead Place (near the cemetery).

By seven in the evening, I received the news of the attack on the army. All Tamils started phoning each other – expecting the worst, but hoping for the best. At about 1 o'clock, on the morning of Monday, the 25th, I was woken by a telephone call from a Sinhalese friend telling me that Tamil houses in Rosmead Place were burning. It was the start of a nightmare that was to last for days.

### *Monday*

The morning newspapers, despite press censorship, published in headlines a statement from the Defence Minister announcing not merely the killing of the thirteen soldiers but also that their funeral, with full state honours, would be held that morning. This was nothing but sheer provocation. Thousands gathered near the cemetery and began looting and burning in every direction. Within hours, Colombo was caught up in the worst holocaust it had ever experienced. Tamil shops and houses were singled out and looted and burnt, while many Tamils were murdered – 500 in the first two days it was estimated. More than 500 cars and lorries were burnt and their wreckage left on the roads. Liquor shops owned by Tamils and Indians were looted and the mobs got drunk. The Indian-owned chain of liquor shops – Victoria Stores – were all looted.



There is no doubt that someone had identified the Tamil houses, shops and factories earlier. Seventeen industrial complexes belonging to some of the leading Tamil and Indian industrialists were razed to the ground, including those of the multi-millionaire and firm supporter of the ruling party, A.Y. Gnanam (the only capitalist in Sri Lanka to whom the World Bank offered a loan), and the influential Maharaja Organisation. The Indian-owned textile mills of Hidramani Ltd, which used a labour force of 4,000 in the suburbs of Colombo, were gutted. So was K.G. Industries Ltd, Hentleys Garments, one of the biggest garment exporters, and several other large textile and garment manufacturing establishments geared for export. The Indian Overseas Bank and the Bank of Oman were set on fire. Several cinemas owned by Tamils were destroyed. The list is endless. The suburb of Wellawatte, where the largest concentration of Tamils had lived, resembled a bombed town. It will have to be re-built. Probably the worst affected area was the Pettah, the commercial centre of Colombo, where Tamil and Indian traders played a dominant role. Hardly a single Tamil or Indian establishment was left standing.

A most distressing aspect of the vandalism was the burning and the destruction of the houses and dispensaries of eminent Tamil doctors – some with over a quarter of a century of service in Sinhala areas. Tamils form a good proportion of Sri Lanka's medical profession. More than one doctor is rumoured to have been killed in Colombo and in other cities.

While all this was happening, the police and the armed forces were more conspicuous by their absence. They either looked the other way or joined in the looting. The army was the worst offender. Several onlookers have reported that army men travelling in lorries waved merrily to the looters, who waved back. No action whatsoever was taken to disperse the mobs. Not even tear-gas was used. The criminal gangs gained in confidence.

During the day, as more and more reports came of increasing violence, I debated whether to move to a safer place with my family. We were living near the heart of the city. But I put off the decision, hoping against hope that the situation would improve, although we had been watching smoke spiralling from burnt houses half a mile away. By this time, about three other Tamil refugees with two small children had taken shelter in our house. Their houses had been attacked. To make matters worse, the telephone failed. Not just my telephone, but all adjacent telephones. We were effectively cut off. By about five in the evening, smoke erupted from two houses which were burning scarcely a hundred yards away. We could not delay any more. Eight adults and three children all vaulted over the high back wall of our house and took shelter at the Muslim house behind ours. Huddled together in the back verandah – lest we be spotted – we lived through a

nightmare which I would not care to have repeated.

### *Tuesday*

As soon as dawn broke, we returned to our home and, on our way, saw the charred remains of the two burnt Tamil houses. Again, the debate as to whether we should leave for safer places. By ten in the morning, Sinhalese friends came by car and we decided to move. Our family split up to go to two different houses. I went with a nephew to a Sinhala friend's house in Ratmalana, a suburb where several factories and houses had also been burnt. I had to keep a low profile in my friend's house so that people would not see that he was harbouring Tamils.

While it is true that the Tamils will never forget or forgive the chauvinistic and criminal elements from among the Sinhalese who wrought havoc on the properties and the persons of the Tamils, it is equally true that they salute those brave and good-hearted Sinhalese who sheltered a large number of Tamils at great risk to themselves. It was with one of them that I sheltered.

We were still under the curfew imposed the previous day. In fact, the friends who took us away in their cars had to have curfew passes from the police. But the fact that a curfew had been imposed was no safeguard – the looters and communal gangs were now confident that the police and the armed forces would not act against them. By now, it was being openly whispered that the government, to all intents and purposes, had lost control of the armed forces. Only the navy, which alone had not suffered casualties from the terrorists, was supposed to be reliable. In fact, when the Prime Minister toured Colombo to see the damages for himself, he was escorted by the Naval Commander.

### *Wednesday*

As Wednesday dawned, there were still sporadic incidents. The curfew was lifted at dawn to enable people to buy necessary provisions. But food shortages had hit the country – not for lack of stocks, but because the distribution system had broken down. The sacking of 3rd Cross Street and 4th Cross Street at Pettah, the business centre of Colombo, meant that the wholesale trade in rice, which was dominated by Indians, had been disturbed. Most of the grocery shops and retail outlets in and around Colombo were in the hands of the Indians or Tamils. Their destruction meant immediate shortages of foodstuffs. Although basic essentials were available in small quantities, many things, like cigarettes, became unobtainable. Queues formed for rice and bread and sugar.

By mid-day, I heard the horrible news about the murder of thirty-five Tamil detainees inside Welikade prison. It was a terrific shock that jolted everyone – Tamil and Sinhalese. Looting and burning by unidentifiable gangs, who then disappear, is one thing. But the killing

in cold blood of prisoners, who had been committed to prison by courts of law and whose safety was the responsibility of the prison authorities, is quite another. Very few believed the story that these killings were the result of a prison riot. How did the other prisoners get out of their cells? Where did they get their weapons? And, most important, who put these Island Reconvicted Criminals next to the detenues and in the same building? And when? And even if one overlooked the first killings, how to explain the killing of a further seventeen Tamil detenues on the following day? What were the prison authorities doing for twenty-four hours? Why didn't they send the Tamil detenues to a safer place? This coldly calculated murder of Tamil prisoners, held in custody inside a prison, will be an eternal blot on the Sri Lankan government that nothing can wipe out. An army officer who had visited the prison morgue told me that the detenues must have been attacked with clubs and knives. Kuttimani had been badly slashed. Among the second batch of murdered Tamil detenues was Dr Rajasunderam, the respected leader of the Gandhiyam movement, based in Vavuniya, which had done yeoman service in resettling refugees of Indian origin from the plantations who had fled an earlier communal conflict.

My Sinhalese friend with whom I was staying was visibly moved by this outrage within the prison. He quoted the following stanza from W.H. Auden, written on the occasion of the death of Yeats:

Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face  
And the tears of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.

He told me that his tears were not locked and, as I watched, they fell from his eyes.

#### *Thursday*

Rumours were flying fast about the possibility of an Indian invasion – even that Indian troops had already landed in Jaffna. This was, of course, a response to the three-hour debate on the Sri Lankan situation in the Indian parliament and to the telephone conversation that Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had with President Jayewardene, in the course of which she asked him to receive Indian Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao, whom she was sending to Sri Lanka on a fact-finding mission.

Sporadic incidents continued and the food shortage worsened. Another Sinhalese friend brought me some rice and flour. It was reported that seven suspects allegedly carrying small arms and bombs in a bid to destroy Fort station, Colombo's main railway centre, were shot and killed.

In the late evening the President made a much delayed speech on TV – everyone wondered why he had not addressed the nation earlier. What a sorry performance! There was no condemnation of the communal violence that had taken place; not even a mention of the killing of the Tamils or of the murders inside the prison. His speech was a justification of the violence by the Sinhala mobs and a virtual invitation for more. He said that the actions of the Sinhalese were a reaction to the Tamil demand for separation. He spoke not as the President of Sri Lanka, but as a Sinhala president. In the course of his speech, he announced that legislation would be brought to ban all parties and movements advocating separation, and that severe penalties, including loss of civic rights and the right to practise their professions, would be imposed on members of such parties.

I went to bed that night with the feeling that Tamils in Sri Lanka were not mere step-children but abandoned children.

All India Radio announced that Indian Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao would be coming to Sri Lanka the next day.

### *Friday*

My daughter and son-in-law had gone home the previous day and reported that the area around our home was relatively quiet. But I could not find transport to get back home the same day. Petrol, by now, was scarce. However, after breakfast, a friend picked me up and drove me home. And, of course, the sorry sight of burnt shops and houses all along the way. Queues everywhere. My telephone was working, but failed again within an hour or so of my returning. Just before noon, we heard the rumour that there was renewed trouble and that the streets were full of people – running and looting. What had happened was this: at Gas Work's Street, in the Pettah, someone had thrown a bomb from the top of a building at some soldiers. The soldiers had fired back and killed two people – both Sinhalese. A soldier had mistakenly shot himself. The rumour then spread that the northern terrorists had landed in Colombo and were attacking the army. Within minutes, the roads were choked with people – some fleeing from the terrorists and others preparing to fight them. For a few moments the roles were reversed, and the Sinhalese were fleeing from the alleged Tamil Tigers. In the rush, several Tamils were killed. One of them was cremated where he fell on the road. Apparently, according to all subsequent reports, the violence that took place in the streets on Friday was pretty serious. The curfew was imposed at 2pm, and continued during the entire weekend.

The state radio had openly to discount the rumour before calm was restored. Earlier, other rumours had been used to create tension and chaos: that Palaly airport in Jaffna had been captured by the Tigers; that the military hospital in Jaffna had been attacked; that the

Buddhist High Priest of the Nagadipa (an island off Jaffna) Vihara had been killed (it was found that he was alive and well in his village temple in the South where he had gone on personal business); that foreign troops (meaning Indian) had landed in the North; and that the army had suffered severe casualties in the North and (according to some reports) had withdrawn to Vavuniya. All these rumours were officially discounted over the radio by a government spokesman.

For the first time, the army shot and killed some looters – fifteen according to radio reports. If such stern action had been taken by the government on the very first day the trouble started, it could have been nipped in the bud.

The Indian Foreign Minister arrived by special plane and had talks with the President, the Prime Minister and a few cabinet ministers. He also flew by helicopter to Kandy, the hill capital, and met with officials of the Indian High Commission. He is reported to have offered any type of help that Sri Lanka needed, particularly foodstuffs and medical supplies. It seems also to have been agreed that India would send a ship to transport people of Indian origin from the refugee camps to Jaffna in the North. This was reported by All India Radio.

By now, nearly ten refugee camps had been set up in Colombo to house those Tamils who had been rendered homeless. The figures rose from 20,000 to 50,000 within days, and then reached 79,000. Conditions in the camps were horrible, almost primitive. The Ratmalana airport hangar, which was got ready to house 800 refugees, accommodated 8,000. According to an inmate, there was hardly standing space. There were over 2,000 infants and 500 elderly people, with only one doctor to serve them. Water was scarce and food was inadequate. Similar camps had also been set up in Kandy, Matale, Badulla, etc., where serious incidents had also taken place. Several service organisations were volunteering to look after the refugees.

In the evening, the Prime Minister spoke on TV and radio. For the first time, it became clear that the government was attempting to shift the blame for the communal violence on to those opposed to the government. The Prime Minister, without naming any party or organisation, said that this was an attempt to topple the government by forces that were defeated at the presidential elections and at the referendum and who were jealous at the economic growth the country was making under his government (sic!).

### *Saturday*

The curfew that had been imposed on Friday afternoon was extended to Saturday and Sunday. It was announced on the radio that 600 looters had been arrested, and that those guilty of looting or murder would be punished with death or life imprisonment. Punishment for selling, buying or retaining stolen property would be imprisonment for

ten to twenty years. The radio report also discounted a rumour that Sinhala peasants in the up-country were getting ready to attack plantation workers of Indian origin and vice versa.

The Minister for State, Ananda Tissa de Alwis, came on TV and radio to suggest that what had happened was not just a Sinhala/Tamil communal clash but a deep-seated plan to overthrow the government. He also accused an unnamed big power as having master-minded the operation which, he claimed, had been well planned. For the first time, it was suggested that certain political parties who had secret connections with the northern terrorists were behind the violence. Still no names were mentioned.

But the identity of these parties was soon revealed when the radio announced that the Peoples Liberation Front (JVP), the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the Communist Party (CPSL) were behind the riots and were proscribed for the duration of the emergency, and that severe penalties, including death or life imprisonment and loss of civic rights, would be imposed on those having contact with the proscribed parties or failing to report them.

To any intelligent political observer in Sri Lanka this accusation must seem ridiculous. The NSSP and the CPSL had never taken up communal political attitudes, except for a short time in 1964, after the fall of the first coalition government of Mrs Bandaranaike. The JVP had been openly anti-Indian Tamil during its 1971 insurrection, but had dropped that stance since and not revived it. There is no doubt that the CPSL and the JVP, which both had close ties with the Soviet Union, were brought in to lend credence to the theory that the Soviet Union and certain Eastern European countries had master-minded the communal violence.

But most of those who witnessed the scenes of looting and arson recognised the gangs as being UNP elements with particular allegiance to two prominent cabinet ministers – one of whom had been revealed as the force behind the communal violence that took place a month previously at the eastern sea port of Trincomalee. The employees of certain corporations under the ministers and the members of the pro-UNP trade union of which one minister is president seem to have played a major role in these riots.

It is also significant that a virulently anti-Tamil book in Sinhala, entitled *Protect the Buddhist Religion*, by Minister Cyril Mathew, had been circulating for some time. It was distributed free of cost. Besides, if the government wants people to believe that the nationwide disturbances that took place were due to the JVP, the NSSP and the CPSL, then these parties must indeed be powerful parties!

It is also easily forgotten that the provocation to violence was offered by the government itself, when it announced the funeral of the thirteen dead soldiers at Kanatte for the morning of the 25th. It was the

crowd of thousands that gathered there that set on foot the communal violence.

### *Sunday*

All India Radio announced that the Indian Foreign Minister had returned to New Delhi and reported to Indira Gandhi that the situation in Sri Lanka had not been brought under control, and that the conditions in the refugee camps were not satisfactory. It also announced that India was willing to send security forces to Sri Lanka to bring the situation under control, if requested.

I heard that on Tuesday, two Tamils about to leave Sri Lanka by Air Lanka were shot dead by air force guards as they walked to the plane. This incident was witnessed by a Swiss passenger on the same plane.

The Indian radio had been announcing protests and demonstrations all over Tamil Nadu. There had been demonstrations in Bombay and several in Delhi, opposite the Ceylon High Commission, in which MPs of several parties had taken part. M.G. Ramachandran, chief minister of Tamil Nadu, led an all-party delegation from Tamil Nadu to New Delhi to voice concern about events in Sri Lanka to the Indian Prime Minister.

In the evening Minister Gamini Dissanayake went on TV and the radio to repeat the previous day's arguments of his cabinet colleague.

During the day, I spent my time telephoning my Tamil relations and friends. Only in two or three cases did I get an answer. As for the rest, the people had either left for safer places or were in the refugee camps. One of my brothers lived in an area which had escaped the communal flames, but my youngest brother had been assaulted by a mob and robbed of Rs. 900/= – his house was saved from the flames by his Sinhala landlord. My son-in-law's mother and elder brother's family had a tough time in an up-country town and ended up in the refugee camp. Their newly built house had been burnt down. Several of my cousins had their houses burnt.

### *Monday*

Several of my Sinhala comrades called to inquire about my safety. I was touched. Some of them brought foodstuffs, like rice, flour, sugar, biscuits, etc. The generosity of the kind-hearted Sinhala friends became apparent. It was almost as if they wanted to atone for the guilt of the rest.

I received a call from Trincomalee from a friend who told me that, following the incidents at Colombo, there was a fresh outburst of communal violence which left most Tamils homeless. They had taken shelter either at Nilaveli or Muttur. From Jaffna I received a telephone call telling me that there had been no incidents – contrary to the wild rumours that there had been heavy fighting between the army and the terrorists.

I learnt the sad news that, in the small up-country town of Matale, the number of refugees had swelled to 8,000. Among them were my son-in-law's mother and his elder brother's family. Incidents seemed to have taken place at plantation towns like Badulla, Nuwara Eliya and Deniyaya, although no details were available. The refugees in Kandy had swelled to over 12,000. At the University of Peradeniya alone, there were 8,000 refugees.

Reports came in from South India about acts of self-immolation by Tamils in protest against the violence on Tamils in Sri Lanka. There were also reports of a petition by about seventeen MPs from the British House of Commons to the Prime Minister calling for the cancellation of the October visit to the UK of President Jayewardene, 'the Butcher from Sri Lanka'. A 2,000-strong demonstration was also reported in London in protest against communal violence on Sri Lankan Tamils. A petrol bomb had also been thrown at the Ceylon High Commissioner's residence in London.

Meanwhile, TV stations in the USA, Europe and even the Middle East were showing pictures of Sri Lanka in flames. Apparently, foreigners in Sri Lanka at the time of the outbreak of the violence had not been prevented from taking photographs and filming the scenes of looting and arson. This led to anxious calls from all over the world. Meanwhile, many foreigners – having had a bitter taste of paradise – were leaving in droves and were clogging every available plane out of Sri Lanka. The tourist industry, which had become the second biggest earner of foreign exchange (next to tea), had taken a serious beating from which it is doubtful it could recover.

### *Tuesday*

Today saw a further procession of Sinhala friends to our home – to bring whatever foodstuffs they could lay their hands on. By noon, we were over-stocked! Things were reported to be returning to normal. The curfew was relaxed and people went out to buy whatever foodstuffs they could.

All over Tamil Nadu in South India, a complete one-day general strike and *hartal* was observed to protest against the violence on the Tamils in Sri Lanka. It was joined by central government employees in the state. For the first time, a strike took place with the support of the central government, the state government and all political parties of Tamil Nadu. Hunger fasts, meetings and demonstrations took place all over, while in many cities effigies of President Jayewardene were burnt.

Indian Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao reported to both houses of the Indian parliament on his recent visit to Sri Lanka and the discussions he had with the leaders of the Sri Lankan government. He told parliament that there was some substance in press reports that Sri



Lanka has appealed to foreign powers for assistance. But he said that it was mischievous to state that this assistance was called for against India. The Sri Lankan High Commissioner in New Delhi had issued a statement denying the news. The Sri Lankan government also expelled an American correspondent of UPI who had sent out the news.

With the restoration of relative calm, the question arose of the future of Tamils in the South of Sri Lanka. Some of the refugees from the camps were already on their way home to Jaffna by ship. More ships were being got ready. India, too, was sending three ships to transport refugees from South to North. What about their future? Could they return to their business, their professions, their employment? Many had had their homes destroyed. There was no place to which they could go. Could they live among the Sinhalese again? What could they do? They could not all go back to Jaffna because there was no economy to support all of them. It is a good guess that most professionals – the doctors, engineers and accountants – would seek jobs abroad. It was already reported that Canada and Australia would ease entry restrictions for Sri Lankan Tamil professionals. All who could would leave Sri Lanka. What about the others who form the majority? Only the future can tell. If one must live, one must live with dignity. Otherwise, life is worthless.

The radio reported that although thirty-one people from the proscribed parties were on the list to be arrested, only eighteen had been detained. The rest had gone underground. Among the latter were the main leaders of the JVP and the NSSP. Severe penalties were announced for anyone harbouring them or failing to report their presence.

### *Wednesday*

Bread supply to our doorstep resumed. It was a sign of return to normal. Offices had reopened. But no Tamils reported for work.

The government announced the convening of parliament for Thursday to discuss the sixth amendment to the constitution, by which all parties advocating separation would be banned and severe penalties imposed on members. Concretely, this meant that the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), with seventeen seats in parliament (its leader is the leader of the opposition), would be banned. This was basically a stupid move because it meant the government would have no one to talk to.

In the evening, the radio announced a speech by the President to his cabinet. In it, he came out with the fantastic story that, when he had called the first round table conference of political parties for 20 July, he had intended to discuss a solution of the Tamil problem, including granting greater powers to the Development Councils, the withdrawal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, a general amnesty to all those arrested under it (anyway, only a few have been left not murdered) and

the withdrawal of the army from the North. But, he moaned, all parties had boycotted the talks and thus prevented him from discussing his proposals for the solution of the problem.

There could be no greater political lie! It brings into question the political honesty of the President. He seems to forget that six years have passed since his government came to power and that, during this long period, he has done nothing (despite election promises) to bring about a settlement of the Tamil problem except more and more repression. He also seems conveniently to ignore his own interview with the *Daily Telegraph* a couple of weeks ago wherein he had said that he did not care for the opinion of the people of Jaffna and that the conference was only to discuss the question of the suppression of terrorism in the North. Obviously the President had to resort to these blatant falsehoods in order to defend himself against international condemnation. Sri Lanka's image in the world had sunk low indeed! A Sinhalese specialist doctor returning from London a few days ago had said that he was ashamed to call himself a Sinhalese when he was abroad. The radio also announced that the Constitutional Court, consisting of judges of the Supreme Court, had ruled today that the sixth amendment (barring two sections) was not inconsistent with the constitution. It will undoubtedly be passed in parliament tomorrow. It is unlikely that the TULF will attend. If prisoners can be murdered, anything can happen to MPs.

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KUMARI JAYAWARDENA

## Class formation and communalism\*

This article will examine some aspects of the structure of the economy in colonial Sri Lanka, the nature of the nationalist and revivalist agitation of that period and the class character of these movements, in order to stimulate the understanding of the present contradictions between the Sinhalese and the minority groups.

Historians have frequently emphasised the incipient nationalism associated with the Buddhist revival and temperance movements of the turn of the century, and have given due credit to the patriotism of leaders who aroused the people to awareness of national identity, giving leadership not only to movements of protest against various aspects of foreign rule, but also providing assistance to working-class struggles. Less notice, however, is given to the process by which early nationalism also gave rise to communalism against minorities. It is in this context, therefore, that I shall examine (a) the rise of Sinhala merchant capital in the nineteenth century and its weakness in relation to non-Sinhala capital associated with the minority communities and to foreign merchant capital; (b) the assertion of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity by the Sinhala merchants and petty-bourgeoisie through the religious-cultural revival; and (c) the communalism inherent in this revivalist ideology.

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\* This is an edited version of 'Class and ethnic consciousness in Sri Lanka', which first appeared in the *Lanka Guardian* (Vol. 6, nos. 5 and 6 July 1983).

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**Class formation in the nineteenth century**

The mercantilist and monopolistic practices, first of the Dutch and later of the British up to 1830, restricted the trading and other opportunities of accumulation that were 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. After 1830, however, the plantation economy provided scope for a class of merchant capitalists who made quick fortunes from the arrack trade. Under conditions of strict protection and control by the state, monopoly rights to sell liquor were auctioned by the government. Under these circumstances, combinations and cartels developed among renters who were able to control most stages of the arrack industry, especially the distillation and the wholesale and retail trade. 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. By educating their families in English and sometimes abroad, these liquor merchants gained in status and added social respectability to their amassed wealth. The new class of merchants and plantation owners was able to challenge the traditional land-owning class, financially, socially and professionally,\* but the limited investment opportunities provided by the colonial economy stunted its growth and left it ideologically backward.

The principal class groupings in late nineteenth century Sri Lanka were roughly as follows:

*The bourgeoisie*, including:

(a) the Sinhala and Tamil plantation owners, mainly of the *goyigama* and *vellala* castes, who were rewarded with grants of land for their services as *Mudliyors* (local officials) to the Dutch and British administrations. Despite the mercantile opportunities of the time, they did not invest their monies other than in plantations; they were feudal in their life-style and remained faithful to the British, many being converts to Christianity. In the Kandyan provinces there was also a stratum of aristocratic landlords who held bureaucratic sinecures and controlled the land cultivated by peasants.

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\* For example, Jeronis de Soysa paid £38 in 1829 for the right to run a tavern at Kadugannawa; he 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 was the leading Sri Lankan capitalist in the 1870s, with interests in coffee and coconut plantations and graphite mining. His sons were educated in Britain and his sons-in-law were eminent doctors and lawyers whose qualifications had been obtained in Britain.

(b) the new class of merchants, speculators and plantation owners of all communities and castes, mainly in the non-agricultural coastal regions. These people were innovative and enterprising, and moved to remote areas of the country in search of quick profits – especially after 1830 in the lucrative liquor trade and in the coffee, tea and rubber plantations. They were essentially a weak bourgeoisie, however, investing their profits in coffee, graphite and coconut, unable to venture into the export-import trade and, in the colonial context, with no opportunity to expand into the sphere of industrial capital. They assimilated British social values and basically accepted British rule, while making demands for limited reforms. Thus, they were in no sense a ‘national bourgeoisie’ in opposition to imperialism.

*A petty-bourgeoisie*, consisting of two segments which cut across caste and communal barriers:

(a) small landowners, artisans, craftsmen, small traders and petty producers, mainly rural-based, who had their origins in the pre-capitalist economy and were adjusting to the new economic trends. These people were educated in the indigenous languages, followed the indigenous religions and were active in local level associations for moral and social ‘upliftment’;

(b) a new group of (mainly urban) clerks, minor bureaucrats, shopkeepers and teachers, generated by the needs of the plantation economy and the expanding activities of the state and the service sectors. The petty-bourgeois intelligentsia (especially in the urban sector) were articulate on economic and social matters and supported movements for social reform.

*The working people*, composed of:

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

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

**Sinhala merchant capital and the minorities**

The ideological content of the incipient political movement of the late nineteenth century should be considered in relation to the condition of merchant capitalism in Sri Lanka. This class of merchant capitalists 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 subsidiary to, and dovetailed into, those of the British; in fact, they benefited from their links with British business and with the colonial bureaucracy.\* But differences existed among the sections of the Sinhala bourgeoisie: the 'new rich' merchants wanted limited reforms, such as franchise for the middle class, political representation, and equal opportunities. They were opposed by the *Mudliyar* group of 'old rich' landowners who unquestioningly supported British rule and, like the British, were apprehensive of the effects of such reforms. The conservative section of the Sinhala bourgeoisie was predominantly *goyigama*; the reform-oriented section included both *goyigama* and other castes, of which the *karava* was prominent. The frequent caste polemics, which were the outward expression of the (somewhat classical) antagonism between landowners and a rising merchant class, have led some historians incorrectly to analyse this period in terms of caste conflict and to interpret the rise of the new merchant sector as the 'rise of the *Karava*'. We are not concerned here, however, with this debate among Sinhalese, but with the ideological aspect of yet another contradiction, namely, that between Sinhala merchant capital and the foreign and minority groups of traders.

At several levels in the colonial bureaucracy, the Sinhalese felt at a disadvantage vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. First, the plantations, agency houses, banks, and key areas of foreign trade were controlled by British interests; furthermore, British policy was aimed at restricting the growth of local industry through a denial of bank credits and by tariff structures that favoured British manufacturers. 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' which traded with India, the Maldives and nearby islands, and had access to ample financial resources and credit facilities. These merchant princes thus had a virtual monopoly of an important part of Sri Lanka's external trade, importing rice, sugar, flour, kerosene and a variety of other products, and exporting

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\* A moderate reformist politician, whose father was a leading arrack merchant, said, in 1908, that 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).

non-plantation produce. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this trade was dominated by seven leading Borah firms, organised on a family basis, and by a few Memon and Parsee traders, most of whom owned plantations, lived in great splendour, gave liberally to British and local charities and were politically loyal to the British. Effectively, these Indian traders 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. In Colombo, the few Sinhala merchants, themselves retailers and importers of foreign goods, were unable to emulate the successful Indians, or to break through into the country's wholesale, retail or export-import trade to any significant degree.

Third, in the area of retail trade, the smaller Sinhala traders were hard-pressed to compete with the traditional trading communities, such as Muslims and Chettiars. Local minority groups also had a large stake in the petty retail trade and peddled all over the country, even to the smallest village – the itinerant Muslim hawker being a common feature of village life. Thus, the small Sinhala shopkeeper, trader or pedlar was constantly aware of the competition from counterparts of minority groups.

Fourth, in the area of wage employment, the Sinhala white-collar workers and other skilled and unskilled wage workers had to compete with Indian migrants and workers of minority groups for the limited employment that was available in an undeveloped colonial economy. The largest section of the working class (plantation workers) were migrants, and competition for employment was particularly acute in government service and in the ports, on the railways and in the urban factories, where there was a high proportion of Indian workers, both Tamil and Malayali.

Fifth, aggravating the disadvantages of competition in trade and employment was the fact that money-lending was a virtual monopoly of other ethnic groups, and Sinhala merchants at all levels, Sinhala white-collar workers, etc., were forced to go to them for credit. Even the prosperous Sinhala arrack-renters and the planters of the nineteenth and twentieth century were not considered credit-worthy by the foreign banks established in Colombo and, denied access in this way to institutionalised credit, had to go to the migrant Chettiar money-lenders from South India, who charged usurious rates of interest.\* The urban petty-bourgeoisie also had recourse for quick loans to the Pathan (popularly called 'Afghan') money-lenders, who were a

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\*Many of the early arrack renters were given loans by Chettiars and it is said that the Chettiar had a prominent place at Sinhala upper class weddings since he had often advanced the money for the wedding.

prominent feature of city life. With the almost sinful practice of usury being associated with minority groups, it is hardly 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 the popular prejudices which were then fostered among the Sinhalese, it is also necessary to stress that in times of economic difficulty, the hostility of the poorer sections of the population could be more easily directed against traders of minority groups. This became clear in 1915, for example, when price rises and shortages caused by the First World War intensified the popular hatred of Muslim traders. The result was serious rioting, which, although it flared up over a religious issue involving Buddhists and Muslims, had strong underlying economic and political causes.

Historically, the animosity of the Sinhalese towards the Tamils had political rather than racial origins, taking the form of rivalry between rulers of kingdoms. In periods of cooperation, relations between the communities had been cordial, to the extent that not only were the last kings of Kandy of the South Indian Nayakkar dynasty from Madurai, but pretenders to the throne (in the post-1815 period) who led revolts against the British, had to feign to be Tamil, even when they were of Sinhala origin, in order to establish their legitimacy.

It was with the development of the colonial economy in the nineteenth century that tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamils took a communal form. As we have seen, neither were able to enter the lucrative export-import trade or the equally profitable retail trade. Moreover, the Tamils, unlike the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, had no avenues of accumulation through graphite or liquor renting, and only a few had large coconut or other plantations. In this situation, the Tamils were the principal competitors with the Sinhalese for the few remaining avenues of advancement, i.e., government employment at all levels and the professions. The struggle to advance through the educational system thus became aggravated, as did that for employment.

### **Sinhala merchant capital and the Buddhist revival**

Resistance to foreign rule started in the early decades of the nineteenth century, eventually taking the form of armed revolt and uprisings. As in many other countries, early resistance to foreign domination in Sri Lanka took the form of a religious-cultural revival. Buddhist monks not only participated in such revolts but also led them; in later times, they were also in the forefront of the struggle to purify and revive Buddhism. By the turn of the century, many contradictions had developed between Christians and Buddhists. The British rulers were regarded as supporters of Christianity and of proselytisation through missionary



education; moreover, most of the leading families of the 'old' and 'new' bourgeoisie had become Christian. Those Buddhists who had made their wealth in arrack renting, mining, coconut, cinnamon and rubber planting, however, had the additional grievance that, despite their wealth and newly-acquired status, as Buddhists they were not represented in the higher echelons of government service or the Legislative Council where, from 1833 until 1912 (with one exception), Protestant Christians belonging to a single family group had been appointed successively to represent the interests of low country Sinhalese. The Buddhist bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie felt keenly that they were a deprived sector of the community, both politically and culturally.

The Sinhala Buddhists, therefore, agitated on several fronts. As regards the cultural aspect, this took the form of an attempt to rescue Buddhism from the degeneration it was seen to have suffered due to the loss of state patronage from Buddhist kings, and the colonial state's support of Christian missionary activities. The Buddhists attempted to replace the state with organised private support for their temples, an important aspect of this being an attack on the government for its neglect of Buddhist education and its support and approval of Christian education and proselytising activities. Another Buddhist target was the state's liquor policy, under which taverns proliferated, causing increased social problems. Such state policies were seen as 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 thinkers' 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 of Buddhism. In 1880, a founder of the Theosophical Society, who was also an able organiser and propagandist, set about mobilising the Buddhists and raising funds for their cause. The movement received money and support from the newly-rich Buddhist cinnamon planters and arrack renters of the Southern Province, and from leading Sinhala Buddhist traders and merchants. While wealthy Buddhists helped with donations, the intelligentsia responded by writing pamphlets and articles, speaking at meetings, and forming local temperance associations and organisations for religious and social work.

While Buddhist traders gave generously to temples and schools and financed the temperance movement, they were supported in their business ventures by the Buddhist press and the Sinhala petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. Jayasekera has pointed out how, as far back as 1888, Buddhist journals wrote against 'alien exploiters', and how,

up to 1915, Buddhist papers continually attacked the dominant trading position of minorities, calling upon Sinhalese to boycott Muslim shops and eating-houses.<sup>1</sup> Such articles against foreign and minority traders were often written by Buddhist monks, school teachers and leading personalities of the movement. The foremost Buddhist activist, Anagarika Dharmapala, for example, wrote frequently on this theme, praising the Sinhala merchants for having accumulated wealth by fair means and calling on them to support patriotic causes,<sup>2</sup> while denouncing the 'merchants from Bombay and pedlars from South India' who dominated the trade of the island.<sup>3</sup>

### **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, imbued with the puritanism that is characteristic of revival movements, criticised the decadence of society under colonial rule, contrasting it with the ancient culture of the Sinhalese. The main emphasis of the movement, however, as symbolised in Anagarika Dharmapala's campaign in Anuradhapura in 1903, revolved around ridding the sacred city of churches, taverns and butcher's shops, rather than ridding the country of its foreign rulers. In the context of the time, such religious agitations – 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 remained 'incipient' and the agitation 'semi-political' – confined to taunting British officials on marginal issues such as temperance, rather than challenging British imperialism in any serious way.

There was no 'national bourgeoisie' with basic economic contradictions with imperialism which was sufficiently strong or mature to lead their religious-cultural agitations into a full fledged anti-imperialist movement. The large landowning 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 any 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, Inspector General of Police, perceptively reported.<sup>4</sup>

This weak bourgeoisie was thus incapable of creating among the

people a national consciousness based on 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 superficial, without seriously affecting the consciousness of the people, who were 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-à-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 visions of a past 'golden age'.

In discussing the ideology of the Buddhist revival, three interconnected myths linked with racial and religious origins, which gained popularity during this period, should be noted:

- 1 the myth of the 'Aryan race' and the view that the Sinhala-speaking peoples belonged racially to this group;
- 2 the 'Sihadipa' concept, namely, the myth of the landing in Sri Lanka of Vijaya and the founding of the Sinhala 'race';
- 3 the 'dhammadipa' concept and the myths of Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka and his special relationship with the island.

European orientalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century who studied the Sanskrit language found that it had links with European languages, and assumed that this presupposed a common origin. The discovery had many repercussions and led to the theory that the Aryans were a racial entity rather than 'a group of people who spoke related languages'. The Hindu revivalists of India adopted this concept, and also the orientalists' 'golden age' vision of the 'ancient Indians as a people with an idyllic society',<sup>5</sup> and laid stress on Vedic culture as being the root of the Indian tradition. The glorification of the Aryans as the chosen people, who had 'civilised' the earlier inhabitants and were the sole progenitors of, and heirs to, Indian culture, was put forward as historical fact.

Among the Sinhala bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie the idea of the 'Aryan connection' was strong and persistent, namely the view that the Sinhalese linguistically and racially were Aryans of North India as distinct from the Dravidian, Tamils of South Indian origin. The Aryan mythology was borrowed from Europe, where it had originated in the period of eighteenth century enlightenment, with its rejection of

Christian dogmatism and the 'Jewish fables' of the Bible, when the quest for origins and the 'New Adam' had begun. The 'light', it was believed, was to come from the East and the origins of the human race were held to be in India. The Aryan theory meant that the colonised peoples and their European rulers were related; as Gunewardena has pointed out, it 'provided a section of the colonial peoples of South Asia with a prestigious "pedigree", it elevated them to the rank of the kinsmen of their rulers.'<sup>6</sup>

In Sri Lanka, scholars began to claim linguistic and racial connections between the Sinhalese and Aryans of North India. According to Gunewardena, European orientalist work on the Aryans was popularised in Sri Lanka from the 1850s onward. In their search for an identity, the Buddhist revivalists adopted the doctrine of racial superiority, glorified an idyllic past, and linked the Sinhalese people with the 'chosen' Aryan race and the 'chosen' Buddhist faith.

In Sinhala mythology, the Aryan myth is linked with that of the landing of Vijaya and his Aryan colonisers from Sinhapura in Bengal; Vijaya (according to the early chroniclers) was the founder of the Sinhala 'race' and landed in Sri Lanka on the day of Buddha's death. Interwoven with this 'Sihadipa' (Island of the Lion) idea that civilisation began in Sri Lanka, with the coming of Vijaya, is the Dhammadipa (Island of the Buddhist Dhamma) concept of the special role of the Sinhalese as guardians of Buddha's teachings. Not only was it believed that Buddha had visited Sri Lanka three times, but on his deathbed he is said to have asked the God Sakra to protect Vijaya in his historic mission to Sri Lanka, the land where the dhamma would flourish for five thousand years.

### **Sinhala chauvinism**

The implications of the Sinhala-Buddhist ideologies were clear: 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 had come 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 'master race' who had prior rights of possession and were the exclusive 'sons of soil'. This idea was typified in a statement made by Anagarika Dharmapala in 1922: 'Look at the Administration Report of the General Manager of Railways ... Tamils, Cochins and Hambankarayyas [Muslims] are employed in large numbers to the prejudice of the people of this island – sons of the soil, who contribute the largest share'.

The second implication was that Buddhism was the religion of dhammadipa, and that 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 'infidels of degraded race', as Tamils, and Europeans, were described in 1912 by Dharmapala.<sup>7</sup>

Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism, founded on the myths of the golden age which were an integral part of the Buddhist revival, also permeated the writings of many novelists, dramatists and journalists of the period. In Piyadasa Sirisena's novels, which were immensely popular, the heroes and heroines were devout Buddhists and proud Sinhalese, and minorities of all ethnic groups and religions were the object of bitter diatribes. In 1909, as editor of the journal *Sinhala Jathiya* (Sinhala Race), Sirisena called upon the Sinhalese to 'refrain from transactions with the Coast Moor, the Cochin and the foreigner'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, W.A. de Silva did not hesitate to make contemptuous reference to Tamils and Muslims, while many of John de Silva's popular 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 new rich capitalists were among the foremost propagandists of the Aryan Sinhalese identity: 'The Sinhalese are a unique race in as much as they can boast that they have no slave blood in them and never were conquered either by the pagan Tamils or European vandals ... the Sinhalese stand as the representatives of Aryan civilisation.'<sup>9</sup>

The popular appeal of such ideologies (which exist even today) may also be explained by the fact that the Sinhala petty-bourgeoisie of small producers, small traders and urban 'white-collar' workers led an uncertain life between the bourgeoisie and the working class, their bitterness being 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 precarious nature of their lives and their narrow horizons made it easy for them to find solace in past glories, in the heroism of great leaders, in myths of high status origin, and in victories against the 'historic enemy' and the defeat of the 'invader'. Where today's Tamil competitor belongs to an ethnic minority which had suffered defeat in war in an earlier epoch, such historical episodes as the famous confrontation of two Sinhala and Tamil kings (Dutugemunu and Elara) are revived, given a false interpretation as a war between ethnic groups and used for building up communal hatred.

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Communalism appeared at the time of the Buddhist revival at the end of the nineteenth century as a vicarious nationalism supported by the weak Sinhala bourgeoisie. It was also prevalent among the Sinhala

petty traders, rural small producers, and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie, who believed that they had little chance of rising in the economic or political spectrum. Ideological support for such views was provided by the Sinhala intelligentsia and Buddhist monks, who were keenly aware of the decline and supersession of traditional culture that had occurred under the impact of alien culture. The urban working class, mostly non-Sinhalese, was weak and, not having developed a proletarian consciousness, was amenable to the petty-bourgeois chauvinism of the time. The Sinhala Buddhists, who felt economically hemmed-in, politically oppressed and culturally deprived, were to find succour in racist myths and legends and, in their search for identity, were to express violence against ethnic and religious minorities. In the Sri Lankan context, there did not develop a strong national-minded bourgeoisie which might have taken a secular-based united stand against imperialism; what came into being was a weak class of capitalists who, together with small producers in the urban and rural areas, espoused the retrograde ideology of communalism which the Indian historian Bipan Chandra has correctly described as 'the false consciousness of the historical process of the last 100 years.'<sup>10</sup>

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## Sri Lanka: the story of the holocaust

If I start this account with the ambushing and killing of thirteen soldiers in Jaffna on 23 July 1983, it is not because I think that that event was the cause of the communal disturbances that followed. It is just that it constitutes a convenient water-shed from which to proceed with the story.

The Tamil Tigers had been luring the army from its camp by feeding false scents. Then, on the night of 23 July, they telephoned the army camp at Pallaly with false information. The army was under orders not to go out on night patrols, but, apparently, some officers could not resist the temptation of winning some kudos. They walked into an ambush. The leading vehicle was blown up. When the soldiers jumped out, they were shot down from three sides. Thirteen soldiers died.

During the next few days, the army took its revenge by killing nearly sixty innocent people in Jaffna. According to the leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) the main, Parliamentary opposition, 'In the Tinnevely and Kantharmadam areas about twenty people, including university lecturers, engineers, students and even housewives, have been shot in their homes and beds.'

The news of the killing of the thirteen soldiers reached Colombo on the afternoon of 24 July. In its wisdom, the government had decided to bury all thirteen at Kanatte, Colombo's main cemetery, with full military honours. But there was an unexplained delay in bringing the

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bodies to Colombo. Meanwhile, news about the funeral had spread and a large crowd, including relatives of the deceased, had turned up at the cemetery. (It remains a mystery as to how this news spread and such a large crowd turned out.) After some hours the crowd seems to have turned restive and, according to reports, either tried to surround the President's private residence, which was nearby, or surrounded his car when he came to the cemetery. Tear gas seems to have been used to disperse the crowd. Eventually, the government agreed to hand over the bodies to the relatives for cremation or burial. By then, it was past ten at night. The crowd then went berserk and started attacking Tamil shops and houses – one Tamil house in Rosmead Place, belonging to an attorney, was set on fire. But the really violent disturbances were to start the next morning.

But even before this, ominous events had already happened at Trincomalee. According to a statement – never challenged – of the Ceylon Workers Congress (whose President is cabinet minister S. Thondaman), 'Even before the riots began in Colombo, the attack on the Tamil settlers in the Mannar, Vavuniya and Trincomalee areas had been set in motion. It is significant that communal violence on a large scale commenced with the burning of the huts of settlers in Trincomalee. They were uprooted from their homes in the early hours of the morning of *July 23*, bundled away and brought against their will to Nuwara Eliya and left as destitutes.' The leader of the TULF also confirms this in his letter of 10.8.83 to the President. He has stated that 'the Commander of the Navy forcibly put about 600 of these refugees into buses at 1 o'clock in the night of the 24th of July and took them to unknown destinations. When I brought this matter to your Excellency's notice the next morning *you said that you were informed they had volunteered to go back to the estates.*' That meant that this inhuman and forcible mass deportation had the President's knowledge and consent.

The settlers who were thus deported on that morning were among the thousands who had been chased away from the plantations during the communal violence of 1977 and 1981 and had taken refuge and settled down in the Northern and Eastern provinces. It was among them that the Gandhiyam movement (which had sprung up for that very purpose) had done a lot of re-settlement work. The government was never reconciled to this situation and always wanted to undo it. On the pretext that crown lands had been illegally settled, the settlers were repeatedly harassed by the army and the police and attempts were made to evict them. Representations had been made by the CWC and other organisations to regularise these settlements and permit the settlers to live there.

But the government brought a proposal before parliament (the brain-child of Minister Gamini Dissanayake) to prevent



‘encroachments and illicit settlements ...’ and ‘unlawful activities of any individual group or individuals, associations, organisation, or body of persons within Sri Lanka ...’ This included provisions from the Prevention of Terrorism Act such as detention without trial for up to 18 months, the power to authorise the police, army or navy to demolish buildings, etc. – provisions whose effect was to brand the settlers as terrorists.

It was the intention underlying this proposal that was acted upon by those who organised the deportation. After the disturbances, the President agreed to a request by the CWC to stay execution of this proposal. But, now, the problem has got magnified in that nearly 180,000 plantation workers had left their homes and moved into the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

Let us return to Colombo and the morning of 25 July. All papers splashed in their headlines the killing of thirteen soldiers in Jaffna. But the *Sun* had a significant addition. Having printed the official communiqué of the Department of Information, it came out with this news. I quote: ‘Meanwhile, according to authoritative sources, the funeral with full military honours will take place *today*. Sources also said the funeral ceremonies to be held last evening were postponed because the bodies arrived in Colombo late last night.’

Yet the Prime Minister subsequently declared in parliament: ‘By 24.7.83 evening a large crowd had collected at the Kanatte Cemetery, although no publicity was given, and it appeared that the crowd was getting unruly. *Consequent to requests made by the relatives of the deceased officers, the bodies were not brought to the cemetery [it learnt that they were kept at Army Headquarters at Panagoda], but arrangements were made to deliver the bodies to the relatives on the following morning*’ (emphasis added).

It is thus quite clear that there was to be no funeral at Kanatte on the morning of 25 July. But, it is beyond question that it was this false report that brought the thousands that did gather at Kanatte. It was this crowd which, according to the Prime Minister, ‘appeared to be well organised, that started attacking shops, other establishments, vehicles and houses of Tamils both in Colombo and in the outstations.’ He went on to say: ‘On this day 48 murders, 209 cases of arson, 7 cases of looting, 60 cases of mischief and 20 cases of other violence were reported from all over the island, including 35 deaths that occurred in a riot at Welikade prison where Tamil prisoners, most of whom were terrorist suspects, were killed.’

But the Prime Minister’s words convey nothing like the scale of the violence which occurred on the 25th, the 26th, and over the rest of that week. Tamil shops, houses and business premises were systematically fired. In Colombo at least 500 cars – some with drivers and passengers inside – were burnt. Tamil-owned buses, running between Colombo

and Jaffna were burnt. Tamil patients in hospitals were attacked and killed – some had their throats cut as they lay in their beds. Tamil doctors had their dispensaries and houses burnt and destroyed. In Welikade jail Tamil detainees were brutally and cold-bloodedly murdered, over two separate days. Thirty-five were killed on the 25th, another seventeen on the 27th in a ‘prison riot’, allegedly by Sinhalese prisoners who somehow got out of their cells, somehow got weapons, and somehow could not be restrained by their (armed) prison guards. (In Jaffna jail, about the same time guards were able to shoot down and kill four Tamil prisoners allegedly attempting to escape.) Altogether, fifty-three Tamil prisoners died in Welikade, their bodies smashed and mutilated.

*India Today*, described the scene in Colombo in graphic detail

Sri Lanka’s capital city for most of the last fortnight looked like it had been taken by a conquering army. Street after street lay empty to the gaze, although the dawn-to-dusk curfew had been lifted, and small, watchful groups of Sinhalese dotted the side-walks, providing flesh and blood counterpoints to the hundreds of burnt-out shops and factories and homes that lined the once bustling markets and roads. The arson was professional, charred shells fallen in on themselves, with blackened signboards announcing Tamil ownership hanging askew, here and there a liquor shop with hundreds of broken bottles littering the floor, or a jewellery mart with showcases battered in and the gold and the gems carefully removed before the torching. Fifty yards from the Indian High Commission, right next door to the police headquarters, stood a huge block, blackened and devastated. ‘The shops in this block had heavy grille doors,’ recalled an eye-witness, ‘so an army truck was used as a battering ram to break through them, and then the soldiers sprang in with Sinhala battle cries to claim the lion’s share of the loot.’

The *Financial Times* reporter, who was on the spot in Colombo, commented that:

The violence was vicious and bloody. But what distinguished it from many other communal Asian riots was the way that the mob singled out specific business premises. In street after street in Colombo groups of rioters hit only at factories (as well as homes) owned by Tamils. Their careful selectivity is apparent now. In each street individual business premises were burned down, while others alongside stood unscathed. Troops and police (almost exclusively Sinhalese) either joined the rioters or stood idly by. President Jayewardene failed either intentionally or because he lost control to assert his authority quickly enough to stem the damage. (*Financial Times* 12 August 1983)

The violence spread rapidly throughout the country, engulfing towns like Gampaha, Kalutara, Kandy, Matale, Nuwara Eliya and Trincomalee. One town was completely obliterated – the Indian Tamil town of Kandapola, near Nuwara Eliya. There was a cold-blooded method to this madness. In Colombo, certainly, the mobs were armed with voters' lists and detailed addresses of every Tamil-owned shop, house or factory, and their attacks were precise. The violence continued unabated – despite the curfew that was imposed. Indeed, some of the most horrifying acts took place in the hours of curfew when only the security forces had the right to be abroad. Everywhere there was a catalogue of arson, murder and destruction. These are just some examples. In the urban district of Trincomalee, according to a report submitted by the Chairman of the Urban Council, 266 homes and 104 business houses were burnt down in one night, 26 July. The estimated damage to the business establishments was about 12.5 million rupees and that to the 104 houses about 9.7 million rupees.

In the relatively small town of Lunugala in the Badulla district, 67 houses, 35 business establishments and two vehicles belonging to Tamils were burnt. A leading businessman and a nun were murdered (*Virakesari* 30 September 1983).

In Badulla itself, according to a report in *Virakesari* of 1 October 1983, quoting the government agent, 127 houses, 252 shops, four Hindu temples, four printing presses, two cinemas, one tavern, three Tamil schools, 79 vehicles and a rural bank were burnt and destroyed. There were 20 murders.

In the nearby small town of Passara, in the same district, 63 houses, 21 shops, 16 vehicles and a printing press were burnt and destroyed. There were two murders.

A feature of this year's violence was the burning of several Hindu Kovils (temples) in outstation cities. In Colombo, it was the season of the annual Vel cart festival, which coincides with the Kataragama festival season, and attracts to it all the castes and all the classes and all the races of Sri Lanka. The Vel cart had come from Pettah to the Bambalapitiya temple when the disturbances broke. The chariot was set on fire.

By the first week in August, reported *India Today*, around 90,000 Tamils from Colombo (whose population is one-quarter Tamil) were herded into the hastily organised refugee camps (fifteen in all), so-called 'care and fare centres'. (In one incident, the army is reported to have taken about fifty Tamil patients from hospital and dumped them in these camps.) 'Almost every refugee had escaped with just the clothes on his or her back; for days on end the women sat surrounded by the squealing infants whose eyes were unable to comprehend the catastrophe ...' (*India Today* 31 August 1983). In a sense, it was the mental agony and the trauma, the scars in the minds of people, that

were worse. Imagine finding yourself overnight without a roof over your head, all your life's possessions and savings gone up in flames, your wife's thali-koddi\* and other jewellery stolen, yourself standing with only the clothes you wear and also realising that many of your relations and friends are in the same plight and that, in many cases, the sources of employment had disappeared!

Can there be anything more demoralising? It is a terrible feeling. It was a feeling that thousands of Tamils underwent during that terrible week in July. The Tamils could not understand how the Sinhalese people, among whom they had lived reasonably peacefully all these years, could have nurtured such venom and hatred against them. The greatest loss is that the Tamils have lost confidence in the Sinhalese. They can no longer feel secure in the South.

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A correct estimate of the material damage suffered is difficult to make (in particular, it is doubtful how much of the damage sustained out of Colombo, particularly in the plantations, where large numbers were involved, was correctly assessed). The Finance Minister's estimate of the damage to industrial establishments during the week of violence was well over Rs. 2,000 million. His estimate of the sum needed for rehabilitation was Rs. 4,000 million; according to the Prime Minister, 442 premises were destroyed or severely damaged in the Pettah shopping area.

*India Today* described how three of the island's 'biggest industrialists' were affected:

K. Gunaratnam, whose empire included textiles, film distribution and transportation; A.Y.S. Gnanam, who started life as a street pedlar and rose to control a major manufacturing firm, St. Anthony's Hardwares, and the Syntex and Asian Cotton Mills, and was formerly a member of the Board of Governors of the Free Trade Zone; and Rajamahendran Maharajah, whose group was one of the largest in Sri Lanka, manufacturing cosmetics, trading and distributing imported products and contracting large chunks of the Mahaweli project programmes. Along with the Hidramanis and the Jafferjees, Sindhi and Bora businessmen who have established strong footholds over the last 50 years, the total loss suffered by these industries was estimated at 2,000 million Sri Lankan rupees (Rs. 800 crore). (31 August 1983)

A task force appointed to assess the damage revealed that the 116 industries affected had export orders worth Rs. 800 million and that

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\*A ceremonial gold necklace which binds man and wife till death do them part.

Rs. 650 million worth of export earnings had been lost. These included some of the country's major revenue earners – textiles, garments, rubber and leather products, coconut oil, desiccated coconut, fruit canning and pipes. The task force has said that Rs. 1,750 million will be needed to replace machinery, plant and equipment alone.

There were about 18,000 households affected, leaving 100,000 homeless. The present requirement of clothing for these victims was around US \$5.5 million and another \$5.05 million for other linen.

In what is termed Sri Lanka's agro-economic tripod of tea, rubber and coconut, tea took the heaviest beating, with stocks worth Rs. 50 million going up in flames. Most of this belonged to the State Plantations Corporation and the Tea Small Holdings Development Authority.

Two rubber exporters lost stocks valued at Rs. 2.8 million, while a well-known brokerage firm lost Rs. 1.6 million when one of its stores was burnt. One rubber manufacturer had his factory burnt. Nine oil mills in the Peliyagoda-Wattala area which were gutted contained Rs. 60 million worth of coconut oil and copra.

### **Who and Why**

How did this happen? How is it possible that people who had been imbued with the Buddhist principles of compassion and non-violence – 'I shall refrain from taking any form of life' – should suddenly be turned into frenzied communal warriors, indulging in senseless killing against individuals they scarcely knew and against whom they had no grievance, except that they belonged to the wrong race and spoke a different language?

There is the story that, at Kiribathgoda junction, a Tamil doctor was pulled out of an ambulance in which he was travelling, slaughtered and cremated on the spot on a pyre of burning vehicles, despite his plea that his hands had been used for healing Sinhalese. How do you explain such moral degeneration?

Some argue that the killing of the thirteen Sinhala soldiers in Jaffna was the cause. This is simply to beg the question. That was not the cause. That itself was the result of the failure to solve the problem of the Tamil minorities. It was just an excuse, as the killing of an Israeli diplomat in June 1982 was merely an excuse for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which had been well planned in advance for the purpose of driving out the Palestinians.

When men, Sinhala or Tamil, put on a uniform and acquire the licence to kill, they, themselves, stand the risk of being killed. This has nothing to do with their race. The armed forces are the main form of the state machinery which the government maintains to repress both the Sinhalese and Tamil people. The same Sinhala soldier who is today

killing a Tamil in the North and getting shot at in return, will, tomorrow, in the South, gun down a Sinhalese when ordered to – as, indeed, was the case in 1971. The Tigers only killed those state security forces who came to repress and kill them. They had not killed any innocent or unarmed civilian Sinhalese.

Further, no civilian Sinhala life or property was attacked in the North during this period. In an interview to the *Daily News* on 14 September 1983, the Ven. Kadawadduwa Nandarama Nayake Thero, incumbent of the Naga Vihara, Jaffna, said: 'No damage has been caused to the Naga Vihara, Jaffna. The rumours spread by certain elements that the temple was damaged were untrue.' Moreover, 'contrary to rumours, none of the Sinhala bakeries in Jaffna had been attacked.' Sinhala people could live in Jaffna without fear, he said.

Some others argue that the violence against the Tamils was a natural reaction to the cry for a separate state of Eelam. If that was so, why were the poor plantation workers of Indian Tamil origin attacked? They or their leaders never asked for a separate state. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of the plantation workers voted for J.R. Jayewardene at the presidential elections, and it was their vote that saved the referendum for the United National Party (UNP). Then why attack them? There was communal violence against the Tamils long before any cry for separatism – in 1956 and 1957, for example.

So much for the easy rationalisations. When one sifts the evidence, two factors become very clear. Firstly, it is obvious that, in every area, the attacks were carried out with absolute precision: the attackers were supplied, in advance, with exact details and addresses of all Tamil premises. The systematic nature of the savagery was commented upon widely by foreign eye-witness reporters. Secondly, in every area, eye witnesses identified the looters and arsonists and murderers as government supporters. The fact that the armed forces actively participated in this holocaust, or at best remained inactive, can only be explained by the fact that they were sure of protection.

The role of the armed forces was acknowledged by the President himself, in a broadcast on All India Radio News on 8 August: 'The recent riots revealed a serious lack of discipline in the armed forces and there is a strong anti-Tamil feeling among the troops and in some cases they actually encouraged rioting.' Cabinet Minister Thondaman, head of the plantation workers union, the CWC, said that 'the guardians of the law remained inactive and in some instances even encouraged and assisted the lawlessness.'

No-one who witnessed it is likely to forget the spectacle of lorry-loads of armed troops gaily waving to the looters, who waved greetings back. The army was clearly communal, their racist feelings no doubt accentuated by their virtual impotence against the armed resistance in the North. They were obviously on the side of the looters and arsonists,

and the government was either unwilling or unable to order stern action. Not even tear-gas was used. It was a week before the first looter was shot. Indeed, the President's (belated) intervention, in his TV broadcast of 28 July simply added fuel to the flames. He did not utter a word of condemnation, nor a word of sympathy to the Tamils. He justified the violence as a natural reaction of the Sinhalese to the Tamil demand for a separate state, stating that 'the time has come to accede to the clamour and the national respect of the Sinhalese people' (*India Today* 31 August 1983), and went on to appease Sinhala chauvinism by immediately banning the Tamils' only legitimate political party in parliament and the largest opposition group, with sixteen MPs in a house of 168, where the ruling UNP has 139 seats. 'Instead of throwing a protective Gandhian arm around the minority population', wrote the *British Guardian Weekly* of 7 August 1983,

the President has thus, at a stroke, disenfranchised the great mass of them and turned them into a race of Untermenschen or institutionalised second class semi-citizens.

The danger is that the President's decisions may be seen – both by the Sinhalese mobs and the Tamil masses – as a virtual endorsement of the blood bath he is trying to quell. If the Tamils as a race are denounced by the administration as disloyal and partitionist minded, then it is natural that they should be hunted down and driven out of their homes and their businesses, just as the new edicts drive them out of public life and the professions.

Malpractices committed by the security forces with the government's tacit acquiescence, or even apparent approval, are no recent phenomenon. The government itself is responsible for their growth over recent years – indeed, since the period of its election in 1977. As the Civil Rights Movement noted:

In assessing the reasons behind the recent holocaust, the alarming trend in recent years of a rapid erosion of respect for the law and for the rights of persons, often manifested in a resort to violence, should be seriously considered. An atmosphere has been created wherein persons who believe they have political protection feel they can break the law with impunity. The government-controlled newspaper, the *Daily News*, stated in its editorial of 20 August 1983: 'We have seen men enjoying positions of responsibility conniving with hoodlums and rowdies, in some cases actively inciting violence ... The law, to be respected, must be enforced without fear or favour. There are people, probably, who fancy they have the wit to flirt with thugs and thuggery, take what they want out of them, as one might of people of easy virtue, and then maintain a firm hand over them. To be so deluded is to ignore the lessons of history.'

The editorial continued: 'It is a known truth that people, who have used devious methods to discredit the law and its institutions, staged massive attacks on men and houses under cover of curfew. Either we admit to these facts and correct them, or we will deceive ourselves again until there is another breakdown of law and order.'

It was the tolerance shown by the government to incidents such as those documented by the Civil Rights Movement\* that made the police and the army think that not only were they the law, but that they were above the law.

The government's accusation that the left parties (the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL), the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the People's Liberation Front (JVP) – none of whose politics were at that time communal) were responsible for the violence of July and August, and that an unnamed foreign 'power' was behind it all, was a transparent device to distract attention from the obvious: that elements within the government were responsible. It also provided a pretext for proscribing the parties and their leadership. As one foreign observer put it: 'Many foreign and local observers ... regard the claim of Mr Jayewardene and his fellow ministers as an attempt to cover up the fact that a few leading members of his own government and his ruling UNP may have played a leading role in the plot which was partially aimed at striking a blow at Tamil activity, at removing Tamils from their positions of relative economic superiority in the South and at stopping Mr Jayewardene trying to reach an accommodation with the Tamils.' That indication, of a motive at least partly economic behind the systematic and precise savagery against the Tamils, is alluded to by other correspondents.

It is probably true, as the special report of *India Today* pointed out, that 'Tamils in Colombo had benefited vastly from President Junius R. Jayewardene's open economy. They opened thousands of retail food outlets, or small groceries called "boutiques", or jewellery shops, import-export firms, and there were even a few millionaire tycoons controlling coconut processing, textiles, or construction material.' If the Tamils prospered under the UNP's open economic policy it was due to the operation of the free market forces of capitalism, so dear to the UNP.

Education Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe, in an interview in the *Daily News* (12 August 1983), accused the regimes of the late Mr S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and of Mrs Sirima Bandaranaike of having ruined local industry by pursuing policies which broke the back of Sinhala industrialists, business and traders. Every step of their nationalisation, according to him, crippled the Sinhala entrepreneur. The

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\*See 'Notes and documents' in this issue for a summary.



reverse is true. It was the period 1956-77, with its increasing state regulation of the economy, that provided a beneficent basis for the emergence of a large stratum of Sinhala entrepreneurs. It was the open economy policy of the UNP, introduced in 1977, that withdrew state patronage from this class and led to a consequent worsening of their position. Some would argue that the violence against the productive enterprises of the Tamils was due to the leadership given by these elements. One cabinet minister in particular, Cyril Mathew, has long conducted a virulently anti-Tamil campaign, aiming not just at the eradication of the economic base of the Tamils in the South, but at the ultimate conquest of all Tamil lands in the North and East for the Sinhalese. In support of these communal claims there poured out hundreds of thousands of pamphlets and leaflets, like 'Who is a Tiger?' and, 'Protect the Buddhist Faith', which were virulently anti-Tamil and which were printed at government cost and distributed free to all layers of Sinhalese – the Sangha, youth, students, workers, etc.

Lest anyone not take seriously the idea of conquering Tamil lands for the Sinhalese, let it be pointed out that Mathew had a *modus operandi* for this. He has located what he alleges were former Buddhist places of worship in the North and East which he claims have now been converted into Hindu shrines and their names changed. He wants to reclaim these places and bring them back to their original position as Buddhist shrines and monasteries.

The plan is exceedingly simple. It is to use the Building Materials Corporation and other Corporations under his Ministry (Industries) to repair or build anew these so-called Buddhist shrines, install a Buddhist priest and then plant a colony of 100 or 200 Sinhalese as *dayakas* to support the priest and the monastery. This programme of work has apparently advanced a long way. Even after the disturbances, Minister Cyril Mathew canvassed these views openly at a recent meeting held at Galle at the opening of the Duttugemunu Vihara. This speech was reported in the Tamil daily, *Virakesari* on the 29th September, 1983. In the course of his speech, Mathew called upon Sinhalese Buddhists to volunteer to go and live near these allegedly former viharas in the North and Eastern provinces. He estimated the number of such viharas at 276.

Much of the foreign press had apparently no difficulty in identifying Mathew as the main instigator of the violence. The London *Economist* had this to say:

The Tamil-baiter the Tamils fear most is an influential cabinet minister, Mr Cyril Mathew. He has been accused of having engineered the Sinhalese counter-terror through his followers in the party's trade union. He denies this vigorously, but goes on to prosecute his anti-Tamil case with files of underlined clippings and his

own speeches, glossily bound under such titles as 'Diabolical Conspiracy'. His arguments about the folly of placating the Tamils and the need to crush terrorism before talking are echoed by many of his fellow ministers. (6 August 1983)

It is worth noting that most of the petrol that was used to burn shops, homes and vehicles was kept ready in white cans at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, which comes under the jurisdiction of Industries Minister, Cyril Mathew.

According to *India Today's* sources, Mathew, who also heads the UNP's own powerful labour union, Jathika Sevaka Sanghamaya, 'was directly responsible for pin-pointing Tamil-owned shops and factories to be destroyed.' (31 August 1983). He has, in parliament, on the debate to amend the constitution so as to ban parties which advocate separatism (i.e., the TULF), defended the violence. 'The Sinhalese were frustrated for years, they were discriminated [against]. If the Sinhala is the majority race, why can't they be the majority?'

The *India Today* report continues: 'Mathew is also the leader of the island's backward Vahumpura community, which comprises over a third of the population and has been at a disadvantage traditionally vis-à-vis the Tamils in jobs and business.'

The last is not true. Mathew is undoubtedly acutely caste conscious. But the alleged grievances the Vahumpura community had suffered were not from the Tamils but from the Goigama community, who are Sinhalese. There is no particular reason for hatred against the Tamils.

Characterised by John Elliot of the *Financial Times* (12 August 1983) as 'widely suspected in Colombo of having had a guiding influence over the riots', Mathew is quoted as denying any direct role. But the report goes on to add that he said he understood why the Sinhalese attacked the Tamils. '“Sinhalese people had come to the end of their tether and took things into their own hands. Mr Jayewardene's government has gone too far in trying to settle with the Tamil parliamentary party, the TULF, which he believes is more in tune with the Tamil Terrorists than the government.”'

### **The Indian connection\***

The UNP, in trying to raise the spectre of Russian influence behind the 'riots', was not only attempting to obtain western imperialist sympathy – particularly that of the USA – and future hand-outs. It was also a move to checkmate India, which had shown open sympathy to the

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\**Editors' note:* Since this article was written, many of the political and diplomatic moves documented here have been superseded by further developments. Nonetheless, we retain the discussion as it stands for the broader perspective and context it gives on the events of July-August 1983.

cause of Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. This is how *India Today* of 15 September 1983 reported it:

*India Today* has learnt that Jayewardene's request for contingency military aid from the United States and Britain was met with the message that Sri Lanka fell within India's 'sphere of influence', and this message was driven home by US Ambassador John Reed, who returned unexpectedly from a six-month vacation on August 8 and met Jayewardene four times on a single day, advising him to turn to his neighbours for help. Jayewardene then spoke to Pakistan President, Zia-ul-Haq on the hot line to ask for help, but Zia stalled and later informed Mrs Gandhi about Sri Lanka's extraordinary request.

According to reliable sources, just before the disturbances, when the Sri Lankan government and its press mounted an anti-Indian hue and cry – India was concerned about Sri Lanka's recent emergency regulation authorising armed forces to bury dead bodies without an inquest – the Indian Foreign Office acted swiftly. It was reported to have called a meeting of all western diplomats and told them of the possibility that Sri Lanka might accuse India of intervention and therefore seek military and other help from those countries; and that India would consider any such assistance, without the participation of India, as anti-Indian. Therefore, when the Sri Lankan government approached foreign powers (despite denials) for military assistance, it was turned down. Indian diplomacy had forestalled Sri Lankan moves.

At the time of writing, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the Indian 'connection' has become vital for any settlement of the communal problem in Sri Lanka. The one main difference between previous ethnic/communal violence and that of 1983 is the open sympathy shown by the Tamils in India to the Sri Lankan Tamils. These two groups share a common language and a common culture. Sinhalese fears of absorption arise from the fact that in this region (bracketing Tamil Nadu with Sri Lanka), there are many more Tamil-speaking people than Sinhalese-speaking people (Tamil Nadu has a population of 53 million.)

Yet, historically, there has been not much intermixing between Sri Lankan Tamils and South Indian Tamils. In fact, there are more intermarriages between Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils than between Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils. But all this has changed overnight, due to the depredations of the Sinhala chauvinists. The solidarity and the sense of fellow-feeling displayed everywhere in Tamil Nadu has brought the two groups together. Sinhalese fears may yet turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Indian connection has also become a matter of strategic importance to the militant youth in the North. In any open confrontation

between Sinhalese and Tamils, the weakest point for the Tamils is that they have to leave half their people as hostages in hostile country. This is a crippling disadvantage. But now, this seems to have been offset by the open sympathy of a big power like India.

The demonstration of support from the Tamils in India for the Tamils in Sri Lanka was remarkable. Early on, there were protest meetings and demonstrations almost daily in most cities of Tamil Nadu. In Bombay and in Delhi, MPs of several parties took part in demonstrations opposite the Ceylon High Commission. M.G. Ramachandran, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, led an all-parties delegation to voice concern about events in Sri Lanka to the Indian Prime Minister.

In August, a complete one-day general strike and hartal was observed all over Tamil Nadu in which Mrs Gandhi permitted central government employees to participate. The strike took place with the support of the central government, the state government and all political parties in the state. On that day, hunger fasts, meetings and demonstrations took place all over Tamil Nadu, while, in many cities, effigies of President Jayewardene were burnt. Three instances of self-immolation by Tamils in Tamil Nadu in protest against violence on Tamils in Sri Lanka were reported.

The most vociferous support for the Sri Lankan Tamils came from the DMK (party in opposition in Tamil Nadu) and its leader, Mr Karunanidhi, who resigned his seat in the state assembly, along with the party secretary, in protest against the inadequacies of the steps taken by New Delhi to help the Tamils in Sri Lanka. He continued to urge the sending of the Indian army to Sri Lanka. But the central government has several times reiterated its stand against any kind of interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka while, at the same time, strongly voicing its concern about the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and the need to arrive at a solution through discussion with their representatives.

In the meantime, the Sri Lankan parliament rushed through the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution, which was meant to punish anyone who demands or agitates or encourages by financing, advocating, espousing or supporting the establishment of a separate state. No one shall, in Sri Lanka or abroad, attempt to set up or espouse such a state. Those guilty will lose their civic rights and be subject to forfeiture of their moveable or immovable property in such a manner as will not make them destitute. He or she will not be able to practise his or her profession. This law will apply to all public servants or corporation and employees of statutory bodies. Everyone to whom the law applies, including MPs and members of local bodies, will have to take an oath of allegiance to a unitary state.

The bill was passed without opposition, with the lone pro-Moscow MP ducking the issue by not voting – because he could not take a

position because his party's political bureau could not meet because the party had been proscribed. What an excuse!

The TULF MPs did not attend the sessions – possibly for security reasons. The Colombo residence of TULF's president and the official residence of its general-secretary had been burnt and looted – the TULF president's wife and daughter had to scale a wall to save their lives. In this context, the offer of the President to provide transport and security for the TULF MPs to attend parliament was meaningless. Besides, the TULF leader, in his letter of 10 August 1983 to the President, has mentioned that both the President and Prime Minister had cautioned him not to travel to Colombo – they could not give him protection. The bill will do nothing but appease Sinhala chauvinism.

### **The role of Buddhism**

Much of the irrationality of thought and action among the Sinhalese can be attributed to the lack of a rationalist tradition in Sinhala/Buddhist thought. Such myths as that the Buddha visited Sri Lanka three times during his life and that, on one of these occasions, left the imprint of his foot on Adam's Peak, are still current. The only historian who had sufficient scientific objectivity and courage to dispute this theory was Dr Paranavitana, who was also Sri Lanka's most eminent archeologist.

Another such myth is that the Buddha, before his passing away, had entrusted the safety of Lanka to Sakra, because he knew that his doctrine would eventually be established in this island; and that, on receiving the Buddha's command, Sakra summoned Vishnu and entrusted the protection of the island to him. Such legends tend to be accepted as historical fact. This is what happens when a monk becomes a historian – as was the author of the Mahavamsa, Sri Lanka's greatest historical chronicle, which was written in the 6th century AD by a monk, Mahanama. All his sources were preserved by the Sangha (monks) of the Mahavira. It was like a breath of fresh air to read the article by Dr E.W. Adikaram, a respected educationalist, which advocated that all the copies of the Mahavamsa should be burned, because they were responsible for a lot of the communal thinking of the Sinhala Buddhists (see his article of 25 September 1983, in the Sinhalese Sunday paper, *Rivirasa*).

To understand Buddhism in Sri Lanka, it is necessary to refer to the schism that occurred in the Buddhist church very early in its history. In all doctrinal and disciplinary matters, all Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka accepted the authority of the Mahavihara, considered the established Buddhist church from its inception. But early in the second century BC a new sect, known as the Abhayagiri sect, became established. (Later on, another faction broke away from the Abhayagiri sect, which was to have the Jetavana monastery as its headquarters.)

Although there were certain differences in text and interpretation, all these three sects belonged to the Theravada or the traditional school of Buddhism. But a new movement gained ground among the Buddhists in India which, as Dr Paranavitana explains, distinguished between the attempt to strive for one's own salvation and striving for the salvation of all humanity. The movement's followers characterised the latter as the greater career – the Mahayana. The goal of working for one's own salvation they stigmatised as the lower career – the Hinayana.

One can easily recognise a similarity in some respects between this schism in the Buddhist church and the schism in the Roman Catholic Church brought about by the Reformation. Like the Reformists, the Mahayana school of Buddhism was more liberal and, therefore, progressive, and attracted to its fold the bolder philosophers. The Mahayana doctrine found disciples in the Abhayagiri monastery, while it was stoutly opposed by the Mahavihara, which became the stronghold of the traditional school of Theravada Buddhism. Thus, the Mahavihara taught the teachings of the 'southern' Buddhists of Sri Lanka, Burma, Siam and Cambodia, while the Abhayagiri monastery taught the teachings of 'northern' doctrines of Kashmir, Tibet and China, learned from the Indian Vaituliya.

A heated controversy arose between the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri monasteries. This furious debate sometimes took the form of wholesale persecution of the opposite sect – beginning in the reign of Voharaka Tissa (215-237 AD). The records kept by the Abhayagiri monastery were burnt and destroyed – a very un-Buddhist act. Thus, the Mahavihara or the traditional school completely defeated the Abhayagiri school of Buddhist thought. It is the Hinayana doctrine of Theravada Buddhism that unfortunately triumphed. It is to this that we owe the intellectual stagnation of Buddhist thought in Sri Lanka. Remembering the iniquities of the Spanish Inquisition, imagine what would have happened to the intellectual climate of Europe if the Reformation had been crushed. That is what happened in Sri Lanka.

The role of the Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan politics has been largely negative and reactionary, although there have been instances when they played a positive role. The Buddhist monks, with a few notable exceptions, are illiterate and ignorant. They do not learn even Tamil. They are narrow-minded, sectarian and inward-looking and identify Buddhism with the Sinhala race. It is no accident that it was a Buddhist monk in saffron robes who snuffed out the life of the most popular Prime Minister and that another was convicted of conspiracy in that crime and sentenced to jail, where he died.

No wonder that more than one Buddhist monk, with his robes raised, was seen leading the mobs during the recent disturbances. It is also rumoured that, during the disturbances, President Jayewardene had to

seek the aid of Ella Gunawansa, a virulently anti-Tamil monk, to pacify the racialists. It was Minister Gamini Dissanayake who brought him to see the President.

Priests like Ven. Madihe Pannaseeha, Chief monk of the Vajirarama Temple, Colombo, provide the thin intellectual veneer to cover the naked racialism of other monks. *India Today* of 15 September 1983 quotes him as alleging that as many as 261 Buddhist shrines and monasteries in the island's North and South have been destroyed by the Tamils. Of course, he adduces no proof. He is quoted as saying, 'This was the price we paid for allowing Tamil invaders from south India to stay back because of our hospitality. We allowed the Tamils to stay anywhere in the island, even to intermarry. In 1977 there were over one lakh Tamils in Colombo, but only a few thousand Sinhala soldiers in the North.' Pannaseeha was among the first to raise the demand for sending a thousand-strong Sinhala army to the North – so much for Buddhist piety and compassion.

Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, except perhaps in the case of the poor village monks, do not lead a simple life, freed from material possessions, as the Buddha preached. Many of them are rich exploiters. This trend started early in Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Sinhala kings from the time of Vattagamani (103-102 BC and 89-77 BC) introduced the practice of donating lands to monasteries for the Sangha to derive revenue therefrom. This was in complete contradiction to the principle of Buddhism, because members of the Sangha were to be free from material attachments. Vattagamani introduced this practice to reward the priest who had helped him while he was in exile. Other kings continued this practice for the purpose of winning the favour of the Sangha. The bestowal of material benefits to the Sangha led to the increase of its numbers because the members of the Sangha began to be assured of a good life – a far cry from the teachings of the Buddha. Thus, these monks became parasites on society – doing no productive work but having all their wants met. Such a fate did not overtake the Mahayana sect because the monks of this order did labour of a productive nature.

Thus, the Buddhist Sangha has, for the most part, played a negative role in Sri Lanka. Unless the Sinhalese, or rather those of them who are Buddhists, secure their release from the domination and tutelage of the Sangha, the future will be grim. Indeed, the very concept of a Sinhala Buddhism runs counter to Buddhism's basic tenets. One wonders whether most 'Sinhala' Buddhists would accept or know that the Lord Buddha was not a Sri Lankan but an Indian. There is no future for Sri Lanka unless religion is divorced from politics.

### **A solution**

What is it that the Tamils want? They want Tamil as a national language and a language of administration. Before 1955, all political

parties had accepted that English would be replaced by both Sinhala and Tamil. Second, they want their children to be educated in Tamil. Third, they desire cultural autonomy. Fourth, they want the economic development of the Tamil areas so that their people can find sufficient job opportunities. Fifth, they want to prevent the forcible state colonisation of Tamil areas with the intention of changing the ethnic character of the area. In connection with this last point, it must be pointed out that what is being objected to is state colonisation and not individuals buying land and settling on it.

It is because they felt that these demands could not be realised within a unitary state that the Tamils have demanded a separate state of Eelam. But, the TULF leader has declared that, if a reasonable alternative like federalism is offered, they could go back to the people and obtain a fresh mandate. It is mulish on the part of the government to insist that the TULF must drop the demand for Eelam before talks can start. The government must negotiate without pre-conditions. It must offer federalism or regional autonomy to the predominantly Tamil areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces. It should, at the same time, withdraw the Prevention of Terrorism Act, release all those arrested and detained under that Act, offer a general amnesty and withdraw the army from the North and East. This should form the basis of a settlement.

But the problem of the Tamils of recent Indian origin, most of whom are plantation workers, is of a different nature. Brought here by the British imperialists to slave in the plantations, the colonial government provided them with minimal physical security (albeit under appalling conditions). Repeated communal disturbances have shown that successive Sri Lankan governments are unable to provide even this. Nearly 180,000 plantation workers of Indian origin have been uprooted from the plantations and are wandering in the North and Eastern provinces. The government must give them land to settle. Almost 25,000 workers who broke out of the orbit of the plantation economy and were self-employed have now been driven back to the plantations.

The problem of the plantation workers of recent Indian origin cannot be dismissed simply as a colonial legacy. While it is undoubtedly true that the British initially brought and dumped these workers in the Kandyan area, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie saw the value of keeping this cheap and docile labour. When, in the 1920s, the Indian government threatened to stop the immigration, a delegation from the Ceylon National Congress went to Delhi to plead against it. They succeeded.

Every year, the state council passed money to a fund for recruiting Indian labour to Sri Lanka. This continued till 1940. Therefore, all our Sinhala leaders, D.S. Senanayake, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Dudley Senanayake, have contributed to keeping these workers in Sri Lanka and to exploiting their labour power. They cannot now be thrown away



like sucked oranges. The Sinhala leaders cannot disclaim responsibility for them because it was the toil and sweat of these workers that was responsible – more than anything else in this country – for making Sri Lanka prosperous through her tea.

When the President was at New Delhi for the Non-Aligned Conference in 1982, he gave a promise that he would grant Sri Lankan citizenship to all stateless people and abolish statelessness. He must be made to honour that promise.

Much of the insecurity among the plantation workers of Indian origin is caused by the type of communal speeches made by senior cabinet ministers, like Gamini Dissanayake, who is president of the UNP-controlled Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union, which, in numbers at least, closely competes with the CWC of Thondaman.

Recently, on 5 September 1983, Dissanayake addressed the executive committee of his Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union at 'Sri Kotha', Colombo. Here are a few extracts from his speech:

Even today, Thondaman has spoken in parliament supporting Mr Amirthalingam and the struggle of the people in the North for their rights. Our Buddhist priests and Sinhala youths have been enraged by this. We have calmed them with great difficulty.

Who attacked you? Sinhalese. Who protected you? Sinhalese. It is we who can attack and protect you.

They are bringing an army from India. *It will take 14 hours to come from India. In 14 minutes, the blood of every Tamil in the country can be sacrificed to the land, by us.*

It is not written on anyone's forehead that he is an Indian Tamil or a Jaffna Tamil, a Batticaloa Tamil or up-country Tamil, Hindu Tamil or Christian Tamil. All are Tamils.

We have decided to colonise four districts including Mannar with Sinhalese people by destroying forests. A majority of Sinhalese will be settled there. If you like you also can migrate there.

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I cannot close this story without a comment on the future of the so-called terrorist movement in the North. The Marxist-Leninist attitude to individual terrorism is quite clear. We do not support it because it is based fundamentally on romantic and petit-bourgeois ideology which is characterised by a lack of faith in the masses. It places its main reliance on a brand of swash-buckling 'Three Musketeers' type of bravado which is expected to perform miraculous exploits against terrific odds. It advocates actions which can be carried out by few individuals without the need for popular support and which can cause enemy losses without securing the support of the proletarian masses.

But, at the same time, the phenomenon of terrorism must be examined in the context from which it arose. We cannot make a blanket condemnation of terrorism. Otherwise, we would be like the Israelis who condemn the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as a terrorist organisation. The militant youth of Jaffna took to terrorism because of the repression and the harassment practised by the predominantly Sinhala army, sent to the North for this purpose by the government. They were justified. It was their activities, not those of the TULF, that internationalised the problem of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and won the latter a certain respect and support, not only inside Sri Lanka but all over the world. Their success is primarily due to the support they have so far received from the Tamil people.

Where do they go from here? Not only must they not engage in activities that would alienate them from the people, but they must quickly take steps to convert this into a people's movement of resistance. They were right in taking up arms. As Lenin said, 'An oppressed class which does not strive to learn to use arms, to acquire arms, only deserves to be treated like slaves...' But, having done this, they should develop it into a people's movement. They must never make it a closed-door organisation, with excessive secrecy. They must base themselves in the people.

And they must now involve the whole people; and, at the same time, link up with revolutionary forces in the South. On the surface, there is no revolutionary movement in the South today. *But, this situation will change.* The worsening economic crisis will lead to class struggles which will soon take on a revolutionary form.

But it is important that the different militant youth groups that are flourishing in the North and East must stop their internecine warfare and unite against the common enemy. Otherwise, it is the enemy that will benefit. (In the course of this discussion I have used the term 'Tigers' only as a generic term and not as referring to a particular group.)

Sri Lanka is sliding down the racist road to fascism. We are already listening to the theories about the master race, as preached by Hitler, and the disturbing under-tones that go with it. We are even to have our own version of Hitler's storm-troopers. The unofficial goon squads that roamed the streets in July-August 1983 are soon to be made official and given military training. That is the meaning of the talk about national service and the permanent institution of the Home Guards. All opposition will be silenced. Fascism will have crept upon us even before we know it unless the working class and the progressive forces read the symptoms aright and take counter-action. On the unity of the revolutionary forces of the North and South depends the future of Sri Lanka.

*October 1983*

RACHEL KURIAN with JENNY BOURNE and  
HAZEL WATERS

## Plantation politics

The Tamil plantation workers of Sri Lanka face a particular and systematic form of racism which is qualitatively different from that meted out to the 'indigenous' Tamils. Plantation workers were brought to the country from India by the British about 150 years ago for the sole purpose of providing indentured 'coolie' labour on the newly-created plantations. The British discriminated against them in a classic sense, i.e., they discriminated in order to exploit. Every aspect of the working and domestic life of the plantation worker was subsumed to the need for profit.

The work, then as now, was very hard, monotonous and exhausting. Workers were and still are kept under a regime of strict hierarchical control. Families are born, live and die in the squalor of the barrack-like line rooms. They are treated as units of labour to be housed and fed as cheaply as possible. All family members, from the youngest child to the oldest grandparent, are forced to pluck tea just in order to subsist. And wages (relating to days worked) are ultimately dependent on the prices fixed in the international commodity market.

Tamil plantation workers are effectively segregated from the rest of the country in what can only be compared to Bantustans. They are isolated geographically — most plantations are in the Sinhalese hill country; they are kept separate from other workers by the actual

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production process (of tea plucking); and they are afforded second-class housing, schooling, welfare and social provision. In addition, in Sinhalese areas, where 'locals' believe that Sinhalese land was appropriated for plantation production, the fact of the Tamils' different language, religion, culture and customs has helped fuel a racist hostility.

The British were solely interested in extracting the maximum profit from plantation labour (under their control, tea, rubber and coconut plantations accounted for 90 per cent of the country's export earnings). But after Independence in 1948, successive Ceylonese governments began to exploit the racism against the Indian plantation workers for political as well as for economic purposes. They institutionalised racism into the statutes of the country, having first whipped up popular racialism against Indian workers to justify this discrimination.

### **Institutionalising racism**

The first government of independent Ceylon set about disfranchising the plantation worker. The Citizenship Act of 1948 stated that citizenship would no longer be conferred through birth in the country but by 'descent' or 'registration'. Would-be citizens of descent had to prove three to four generations of paternal ancestry in Ceylon. As compulsory registration of births had been enforced only in 1896, nearly 99 per cent of plantation workers could not comply with this. (All other 'indigenous' groups would have been hard put to it to produce such proof, but they were automatically conferred citizenship by descent.) The Indian and Pakistan Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 and the Ceylon Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act of 1949 effectively disfranchised all those who failed to gain citizenship.

The vast majority of the Indian plantation workers who had been active in the elections of 1931, 1936 and 1947, and who had begun to organise in trade unions under the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC), were now without any political clout. Moreover, as non-citizens, they could not get employment in any state enterprise and they had no right to social services, to register as traders or to buy land. They were tied lock, stock and barrel to the plantation and cut off politically once and for all from their Sinhalese neighbours. They had been rendered a captive 'stateless' labour force.

Then, in 1964, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government took state racism one step further. Mrs Bandaranaike – to justify her attempts to 'repatriate' the 'stateless' workers – argued, like her United National Party (UNP) predecessors, that the Indian plantation workers had, by exercising their votes, virtually disfranchised the native Kandyans. Initially, India refused to take responsibility for the workers, but eventually a compromise was arrived at. Under the

Sirimavo-Shastri Pact, which was made without any consultation with those affected by it, 525,000 Indian Tamils were to be repatriated and given Indian citizenship, while 300,000 were to be granted Ceylon citizenship. Another 150,000 people were left out of the deal altogether, and so made ipso facto stateless. The division was quite arbitrary and, in fact, 700,000 applied for Ceylon citizenship and only 400,000 for Indian — making a nonsense of the agreed quotas. The Ceylon government responded by being very slow to grant citizenship, turning down applicants and forcing them to retreat to India. As Father Paul Caspersz of the Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality wrote: 'For most of the workers, it was not to be repatriation, but expatriation and in some cases deportation.'<sup>1</sup> In 1974, a new deal between Mrs Bandaranaike and the Indian government to speed up the 'repatriation' was agreed. The plantation workers often did not want to leave, for in many cases they faced absolute destitution in India, but they were given no choice by the SLFP and its United Front government.\*

The plantation workers became yet further disillusioned with the SLFP when they had to bear the brunt of the effects of nationalisation. Under the 1972 and 1975 Land Reform laws, the state took over units of tea land larger than fifty acres and passed them to state boards and experimental co-operatives. The co-operatives often failed to live up to their pro-worker rhetoric, and workers sometimes went unpaid and found themselves cut out of other promised benefits. In addition, because nationalisation 'brought into everyday management, parochial patronage politics that [had] been the bane of state sector management since the 1950s',<sup>2</sup> it opened the door to massive corruption and a new racism. Tamil workers were not considered for land alienated by the land reforms. In fact, in estates in the areas of Kandy, Gampola, Pussellawa, Kotmale, Matale and Nawalapitiya, plantation workers were simply ejected as Sinhalese peasants were recruited by the new managements. Whole families were made destitute over night, reduced to begging on the streets of villages and towns in the tea country.

Elsewhere on plantations there were drastic food shortages because of problems with the distribution of basic food stuffs such as rice — partly brought about by the government's policy of import-substitution. According to Michael Gillard, who helped make the Granada TV film on tea workers' conditions which led a shocked British public to boycott tea, 'At least 1,000 people were dying every month' around the plantations in 1975.<sup>3</sup>

Cut off from political power because of their 'statelessness', the

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\* By October 1979, when the pact was first due to end, Sri Lanka had granted citizenship to only 160,000. And by 1982, up to 400,000 people still remained 'stateless' in Sri Lanka.

plantation workers relied increasingly on their unions – in particular the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) – to fight their battles. Between 1972 and 1975 there was a plethora of strikes, many of which were related to food shortages. The 'indigenous' Tamil politicians of the North and East had seldom (with the exception of individuals such as Chelvanayakam and Arunachalam from an earlier period) been interested in the lot of the plantation workers, whom they regarded as low caste. Indeed, the plantation workers were as much outside the Jaffna social system as they were outside that of the Sinhalese South. But, as one Sinhalese government after another played the communal game and discriminated in every aspect of society against the Tamils – both 'indigenous' and plantation – the Tamil political leaders began to acknowledge the common denominators of Tamil struggle. As hopes for government redress to Tamil grievances receded, the leaders of the Tamil Congress (TC) and the Federal Party (FP) invited the CWC to join with them in a common front.

1976 saw the formation of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) with the CWC, FP and TC leaders as its co-leaders. It contested the 1977 elections with the demand for a separate socialist state in the North of Tamil Eelam (though the CWC expressed certain reservations over this demand). The TULF gained eighteen seats in the North and East and the President of the CWC, Mr Thondaman, was returned in the up-country. It was the first time in almost thirty years that the Tamils of Indian origin had been able to elect in general elections their own representative.\* Since the UNP had won a landslide victory with 139 seats (the traditional opposition, the SLFP, gaining only eight seats), the TULF became the official parliamentary opposition. Suddenly the Tamil cause and the role of the CWC assumed enormous significance in parliamentary politics. From 1977 to 1983 the UNP strategy for the plantation sector focused on two concerns: the need to win over the CWC and the plantation workers politically, away from the TULF and the 'Tamil cause', and the need to 'modernise' the plantation sector economically so as to fashion it to the needs of the export-oriented 'open economy' they had ushered in. But both the political and the economic strategies were to founder on the rabid communalism that was sprouting in the interstices of the Jayewardene government.

### **The UNP and plantation land**

The UNP inherited a nationalised plantation sector from the previous government. Nationalisation, though on the face of it a progressive move (ridding the country of foreign-based firms), had in fact been

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\* After the disfranchisement of the plantation workers, the government had nominated members to represent their interests in the House of Representatives.

only partially successful.\* Production was down on most estates because of inefficient management and corruption. The workers were demoralised and much labour (including the skilled) had been 'repatriated' to India. Tea prices had fallen on the international market. The UNP was not primarily interested in developing this sector, but only in using it to cushion the economy from balance of payments problems. As much surplus as possible was to be siphoned off (through duties, etc.) to finance other key projects. Instead of tackling the inherited problems of this sector, the UNP government compounded them by adopting policies geared not to economic need but to an arbitrary free enterprise philosophy. Hence it ended the co-operatives, decentralised the plantation corporations, invited private investment and alienated plantation land to 'development' projects and agribusiness. The result was that inadequate re-investment took place in the industry and production fell, leading to a fall in export earnings and budgetary revenue.\*\*

The UNP dismantled the co-operatives soon after coming to power and put all plantation land under the two state corporations – the Janatha Estates Development Board (JEDB) and the Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation (SLSPC). In 1979 the two corporations were made into ministries and placed under presidential control, and by 1980 the ministries were reorganised on a regional basis. The argument was that the ministries' land holding was 'too unwieldy for efficient management' and that the new local regional boards would have more autonomy. In reality, the state held more control with the President now the minister in charge. And, for the first time, competition was introduced between plantation workers – under the two ministries and between regions. At a social level, efforts were made to imbue workers with a spirit of competitiveness by means of sports fixtures and beauty contests. This was a blatant attempt at manipulating the workers to compete with one another, whilst the real purpose – increasing profits while cutting costs – was hidden from view.

Less productive mid-country tea land was handed over to a new National Agriculture Diversification Settlement Authority, and when this project foundered, the land was given to the local Sinhalese villagers. Nineteen estates in Kotmale valley were alienated for resettling Sinhalese families displaced by the Kotmale Reservoir Project (part of the Mahaveli Scheme). These alienations were carried out to benefit the

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\* In any event, the foreign companies which were nationalised still retained control of the shipping, marketing, packaging and retailing of tea. The price of the product rested with them.

\*\* It was not until 1983 that any consideration was given to the decline, when it was realised that 'the rehabilitation of the plantation industries has assumed crucial importance in view of their overriding present and potential contribution to the export earnings.'<sup>4</sup>

Sinhalese peasantry, without any concern for their impact on estate workers, who, as a consequence, faced eviction and unemployment.

Some land was simply returned to its former owners (where compensation schemes had not been settled), other land was opened up to private investment. A tax holiday was given to new investors, and a new company, headed by both government and private sector officials, was set up by the government in 1981 to run the estates owned by the Land Reform Commission. Behind all these moves was the intention of ensuring tighter control over profitable land, whilst spreading the risk of less profitable lands to private hands.

### **The UNP and the CWC**

Whilst the UNP dealt ruthlessly (if short-sightedly) with plantation lands, it tried at the same time to cajole and win over plantation labour by buying off Mr Thondaman, on the one hand, and making minor concessions by way of pay and conditions to the workers, on the other. For the CWC occupied a unique position in the Tamil opposition.

The communal violence against the Tamil people unleashed after the 1977 election particularly affected the plantation workers. And this, coupled with the growing realisation that the UNP had no intention of living up to its election manifesto promise to solve Tamil problems 'without loss of time', had strengthened the demand for a separate state of Eelam. In the post-election period, therefore, the UNP was determined to weaken and divide the Tamil opposition and to draw Mr Thondaman into its ranks.

An important step in this direction was the inclusion in 1979 of Mr Thondaman into the cabinet, as Minister of Rural Industries Development. As far as the government was concerned, the inclusion of Mr Thondaman served three purposes. First, it created a split in the main opposition party, the TULF. Although the CWC was part of the TULF, it was more concerned with the many forms of discrimination faced by Tamils generally than with the call for Eelam. The CWC also took the position that the problems of the plantation workers had to be solved outside this issue. By involving the president of CWC in the government, the UNP was able to use the CWC as a wedge between the Tamil liberation movement and the plantation Tamils, something that was to prove important as the call for Eelam received increasing support amongst the people in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

Second, Mr Thondaman was in control of at least 200,000 votes in the plantation areas. This was largely due to the speeding up of the repatriation/citizenship process under the Sirimavo-Gandhi Agreement of 1974. As a consequence, more of the hitherto 'stateless' plantation workers were gaining voting rights, and had an important impact on the voting patterns in their areas. Mr Thondaman's presence in



the cabinet had the effect of shifting the CWC's popular base from the TULF towards the UNP government, as many of the workers felt that, with their leader in the cabinet, they had some chance of getting policies in their favour.\*

The importance of this 'captive vote' was shown most clearly in the presidential election of 1982 and the subsequent referendum in December. An analysis of the election results reveals that Jayewardene won largely due to the shift of the bulk vote of the plantation workers to the UNP. The shift was highest in the Nuwara Eliya District, with an increase (from 1977) of 20.14 per cent to the UNP. The importance of the plantation workers' votes was even more evident in the referendum. While most parties opposed the extension of parliament for another six years, the highest votes in favour of the government were in the plantation areas. Without these votes, the government might not have been able to swing the referendum in its favour.

Third, the inclusion of Mr Thondaman in the cabinet also served to divide the working-class opposition. For the CWC now supported anti-working class and anti-democratic legislation, as was clearly illustrated during the island-wide strike of 1980. The Essential Services Act of 1979 had robbed workers in public sector corporations of the right to go on strike – workers who were being hit by rapid inflation and who had begun to experience extreme difficulties in getting adequate food and affording decent lodging. As economic pressures increased, the various trade unions formed the Joint Trade Union Action Committee in March 1980, which subsequently launched a series of protest strikes. Not only did the CWC fail to support this working-class struggle – although its members were just as affected – but it actively supported the government.

In return, though, there were some concessions. The issue of 'statelessness' and deprivation of rights had been the most serious setback the plantation workers had experienced. With Thondaman in the cabinet, these issues had to be tackled. The 1978 constitution abolished the distinction between 'citizenship by descent' and 'citizenship by registration' – the vast majority of plantation workers (if granted citizenship) were in the latter category and were now given nominal equality of status. The constitution also extended 'fundamental rights' to the 'stateless' for a period of ten years. 1978 also saw the repealing of the Local Bodies Election Ordinance, which meant that plantation workers could now vote in local elections. The Indo-Ceylon Agreement (Implementation) Amendment Act No 47 of 1981 provided that the

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\* Thondaman himself was quoted in *Virakesari*, in June 1981, as saying: 'Our political position has changed to the extent that we have no longer to wage struggles to find solutions to our common problems but are now in a position to ask for and obtain our rights at cabinet level.'<sup>5</sup>

number of persons granted citizenship of Sri Lanka and the number of persons to be recognised as Indian citizens would be in the ratio 4:7, irrespective of the number who had actually been repatriated.

However, the situation of the plantation workers remained fundamentally unchanged, for the concessions were minimal and did not address themselves to the real issues behind the 'statelessness', nor provide any means by which this discrimination could be removed. Moreover, policies adopted at the national level were not automatically implemented at the local level. The net result was that the plantation workers remained trapped in their historical position of segregation and exploitation. The lack of any genuine commitment to improving the lot of the workers can be seen in the fact that all the economic measures – concerning employment, wage levels, welfare, etc. – that the government took in relation to them were basically concerned with retaining them as cheap, segregated labour in a sector which could be used to finance other UNP development programmes.

### **Plantation conditions under the UNP**

In its election manifesto, the UNP had committed itself to tackling unemployment. What this meant in the plantation sector was, in fact, an increase in Sinhalese employment at the expense of Tamil employment. As already noted, plantation lands alienated for other schemes were handed to the Sinhalese peasantry. Where numbers of workers were increased on estates (so as to raise productivity without capital investment) – ratios going up from 1 to 1.25 per acre in tea, 0.45 to 0.75 in rubber, and 0.1 to 0.3 in coconut – the jobs were given to Sinhalese workers, most of whom were women. Sinhalese villagers lived around the low and mid-country plantations and these began to have an excess of labour, which in turn affected the estates' profitability. In the up-country, where the high quality tea was grown, there was a shortage of labour, for Indian Tamil workers had been driven from these areas by a combination of government racism – as evinced in the repatriation policy – and the unchecked communal riots of 1977 and 1981. Since Sinhalese did not live in the up-country, because of the distance of the plantations from their villages, the isolation and the hardships, the most profitable estates could not even replace their labour, let alone increase it.

The standard minimum daily wage of the plantation worker appears at first glance to show a small increase during the UNP period of office. In fact, this is not the case. Though wages appeared to increase between 1977 and 1979 (and then decrease after that), this is only because they had fallen so sharply under the SLFP (1970-77) that a return to the pre-1970 position shows up as an increase. And though a minimum wage is fixed by the Wages Board, this does not guarantee a

steady income. Estate workers are paid once a month and pay depends on days worked. There is no guarantee that workers will be offered a reasonable number of days of work per month – in fact, many recent worker protests have centred around the fact that work was scarce. Basic wage differentials between men and women have also been continued by this government; the way work is allocated discriminates against women; alternative sources of work are less available to women than to men; and women overall work longer hours for less pay. All these factors reflect the discrimination meted out to estate workers under the UNP, resulting in severe hardship.

On 1 April 1984, in one of the biggest ever strikes of plantation workers, 600,000 withdrew their labour in protest against a private deal first entered into with a UNP union – the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union (of which cabinet minister Gamini Dissanayake is president) – and then put to all the workers. In this deal, male and female wages were equalised (at Rs. 21.75 per day) and a guarantee of six days work per week was given. But the wage increases were nothing near the workers' entitlement (about Rs. 40 per day) and they were also being denied the cost of living and other allowances granted to workers in other sectors. The *Christian Worker* commented on the fact that the government had not been able to buy up the plantation workers via political concessions: 'Coming in the wake of the All Party Conference to grant Sri Lankan citizenship to 93,000 "stateless" people ... it is most significant that *this strike has focused attention on the economic issues faced by the working people.*'<sup>7</sup>

The cynicism of the government towards the plantation workers is most clearly shown in the area of social and welfare provision. From the cradle to the grave, management's sole concern is the supply of an adequate labour force. In 1979, UNICEF started a programme of collaboration with the Sri Lankan government to up-grade existing crèches, build new ones, provide milk powder and equipment and train attendants to take care of children. There are still only comparatively few of these up-graded crèches. The majority of children are confined to badly built buildings with poor sanitation and water facilities. Moreover, where new crèche attendants have been recruited, most of them are political appointees and therefore Sinhalese. They do not even speak the language of the children in their care.<sup>8</sup>

Again, in housing, improvements supported by foreign aid agencies have been woefully inadequate. The Tea Rehabilitation Project plans 13,000 housing units, the Integrated Tea Development Project 3,420, the Tea Rehabilitation and Diversification Project, 5,900. But since it has been estimated that over a quarter of a million housing units need to be improved,<sup>9</sup> as 90 per cent of workers live in line rooms, this barely touches the housing problem.

Family planning is the one area in which the government has exerted

itself – with the stress on terminating rather than controlling fertility. Most available information is on vasectomy and tubectomy. Mothers are paid Rs. 500 for a tubectomy, men Rs. 250 for a vasectomy. Given the low income in this sector and the patriarchal social structure, this tends to increase the state's control over women's reproduction.

Medical facilities (other than for birth control) are totally deficient. Plantation workers are invariably exposed to difficult weather conditions, bad drinking water and inadequate sanitation, and most of their illnesses are related to these – the most common complaints being bowel disorders, boils, coughs and headaches. The response of management and estate medical attendants is to dole out superficial cures, such as aspirin, so that illnesses more often than not recur. No steps are taken towards preventive medicine.

Until nationalisation in 1975, education provision was the responsibility of individual estate managements, who often took the view that the most important use of the schools was to keep the children occupied so their parents could work. The UNP continued SLFP policy of attempting to absorb estate schools into the national education system. This has resulted in the closure of schools with no alternatives being provided, a persistent shortage of teachers, buildings and equipment and the falling of attendance rates.<sup>10</sup>

### **Communal violence and the plantations**

But the largest impact on the lives of plantation workers – and the issue which was ultimately to confound UNP attempts to co-opt Thondaman – was the massive communalism unleashed under the UNP government from 1977 to date. Communal violence against plantation workers was, more than any other factor, responsible for the shortage of labour in the up-country. And it was because workers fled from the plantations to settle (for the first time) close to 'indigenous' Tamils in the North and East that a genuine organic unity began to grow up between the two communities.

Violence against 'indigenous' Tamils had, of course, taken place since 1956, but it is under the present UNP government that plantation Tamils have been attacked on a massive scale by Sinhalese thugs – in 1977, 1981 and 1983. The first assault on plantation workers came in the wake of the 1977 elections. While the violence was experienced all over the island, it was concentrated in the southern and central parts of the country. Plantation workers were attacked on the estates, subjected to arson and rape, rendered homeless and their possessions looted. Thousands of them were left destitute. The police and army did little to help them and in many cases actually joined in the plunder.\*

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\* It was clear that many of those who had been involved in organising the violence had the patronage of those in power, and little was done to bring them to justice or punish them.

The plantation workers were crowded into refugee camps, from which hundreds opted to leave for India. Those who remained were later transported by the government under armed escort to Vavuniya and Kilinochchi. A number of non-government organisations of Tamils subsequently came to their assistance. The Sansoni Commission was appointed to look into the 1977 violence, and in all instances it showed that the plantation workers had been innocent victims of racially motivated attacks.

Four years later the plantation workers were again subjected to brutal and systematic racial violence. In the aftermath of this pogrom, the CWC made it clear that this had not been a spontaneous outburst but that there had been a degree of planning behind it. As the statement of CWC issued on 29 August 1981 makes clear, the plantation workers had been 'forced to flee their line rooms', to become the 'targets of hoodlums and thugs' who ran riot 'looting, murdering, maiming and raping these defenceless people'. The CWC noted that the attack on the workers 'followed a pattern' and that, as in 1977, 'the machinery established to provide safety and security to members of the public' remained 'passive and mute while rowdies went on the rampage and ruled the roost against members of one community'. Significantly, the CWC went on to state, 'the very fact that the plantation workers, innocent of any crime, were singled out ... created a feeling among the people that the thousands of hooligans covertly enjoy the patronage of powerful personalities, and that the incidents were planned, and orchestrated by unseen hands'.

As in 1977, this violence led to an increased rate of repatriation to India and the movement of refugees to the Trincomalee District in the East and to Vavuniya and Mannar, where they tried to eke out a living as 'settlers'. The government has done all in its power to attack these settlements and break the solidarity between the 'indigenous' and the 'Indian' Tamils. In 1982, it declared Vavuniya a part of its Agricultural Production Zone for foreign agribusiness, forcing Indians to flee yet again. In April of 1983, the police and army raided the Gandhiyam settlement in Vavuniya, where Tamils had been running a self-help project on Gandhian lines (with the help of western aid agencies) to help resettle the refugees. Gandhiyam's leaders ('indigenous' Tamils) were held in army camps and tortured. Gandhiyam's offices, trucks and settlement huts were destroyed on a number of occasions. And, on the eve of the pogrom in July 1983, the huts of Trincomalee settlers were burned to the ground. During the pogrom, Indian Tamil settlers in the Trincomalee District were rounded up, herded against their will into police lorries and army jeeps and driven across the country to be dumped and left as destitutes in Hatton and Nuwara Eliya in the hill country.

The violence against the plantation workers forced Mr Thondaman into a choice between his ministerial obligations and his loyalty to the

CWC. And he could not but choose the workers. In a statement issued by the CWC on 1 August, he made it clear that he believed that the state apparatus no longer acted to protect victims of this 'savage form of violence' and that 'these squads of goondas and rabble have been allowed to parade the streets freely, causing havoc and inflicting misery of such proportions with impunity'.

At an emergency meeting of the National Council of the CWC, held on 14 August under his chairmanship, a statement was issued which went even further in its condemnation of the government.

Instead of implementing the declared policy of regularising the settlements of persons of Indian origin in these areas, where they were transported and dumped as refugees after the previous holocausts, a concerted attempt has been made by the officials to drive them out of their holdings under various false pretexts. This had further intensified around the middle of July when the police and security personnel set in motion a wave of terror intimidating the settlers and driving them away.

Violence against the Tamil minority, which has been a permanent feature of Sri Lanka's political scene during the past three decades, has erupted once again on a large scale with unprecedented savagery. Organised groups went on the rampage, unchecked for nearly a week, destroying and looting property, setting houses and establishments on fire, and killing and maiming the innocent and defenceless victims while the guardians of the law remained inactive and in some instances even encouraged and assisted the lawless. It is this attitude of the law enforcing agencies that has shaken the confidence of the people and eroded their faith in the government.

Government policy towards the Tamils and the pogrom of 1983 has turned Mr Thondaman away from his political/class allegiance to the UNP and headed him straight back to his Tamil constituency. But with a difference. In an outspoken interview with the *Lanka Guardian*, he was asked to explain his meeting with Maheswaran (one of the Tamil liberation movement leaders), and he appeared to hold to a Tamil unity which he had hitherto eschewed.

Whether it is Amirthalingam or the CWC or Maheswaran ... an identification has been created by the manner in which all Tamils have been treated in the past. We have different organisations, different policies, different problems but when there is a determined policy to discriminate, to harass, to persecute, to crush, then all Tamils, whether in Tamilnadu or here or anywhere in the world, feel that injustice is done.<sup>11</sup>

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NANCY MURRAY

## The state against the Tamils\*

The government of J.R. Jayewardene is waging war against the Tamil people. It is a war which all Sri Lankans are bound to lose. Although the government's recent use of emergency powers is not new – over the past three decades, Sri Lankan governments have resorted to emergency rule at least once every five years – the intensity of state-sponsored violence against 20 per cent of the population is bringing into existence both a new spirit of resistance among the Tamil people, and a political future of fearful proportions for the country as a whole. When racism marches forth with such despotic audacity, clothed in the coercive power of the state, fascism cannot be far behind.

Ever since independence (1948), Sinhalese-dominated governments have passed legislation discriminating against the Tamils in matters of education, language, employment and religion, have deprived the plantation Tamils of citizenship and the vote, and have encouraged Sinhalese settlers to colonise traditional Tamil territories. Racial violence took the form of a pogrom in 1958 – when the government kept silent for four days, whilst mobs burned, raped and butchered Tamils living in the Sinhalese areas, leaving hundreds dead and thousands displaced. Soon the security forces were to spearhead the

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*Nancy Murray* is a member of the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism and of the Council of the Institute of Race Relations.

\* If this account reads like an unrelenting catalogue of atrocities inflicted by the state on the Tamil people (particularly in the North), that is exactly how the Tamils have experienced it.

*Race & Class*, XXVI, 1(1984)

violence – breaking up peaceful Tamil demonstrations, arresting and torturing Tamil youth, and, in 1974, invading an international Tamil conference and bringing about the death of nine participants.

By the time the United National Party (UNP) assumed office in 1977 Sinhalese domination and the experience of terror and insecurity had led to the merging of the various Tamil parties in the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) – dedicated to work through peaceful means for regional self-determination, leading possibly to a separate Tamil state (of Eelam) – and to the emergence of small groups of youths known as the Liberation Tigers, who expressed their disenchantment through violent acts directed against state security personnel, government buildings and banks. According to official figures, the Tigers were fewer than 200 in number in 1980. They were poorly equipped, and lacked the wider support of the community. Nevertheless, Jayewardene's government chose to regard them as a major armed threat, and has used their sporadic activities as the excuse to mount a general and indiscriminate onslaught against the Tamil people in the traditional Tamil lands in the North and East. By treating a political problem as an issue of law-and-order, to be settled by force alone, the government has in the process recruited thousands of Tamils to the cause of Eelam and Tiger militancy. With its insistence on a military solution – which can never work unless genocide is the aim – the UNP regime has nourished the very thing it set out to destroy: the spirit of separatism.

Faced with country-wide riots and racial violence directed against the Tamils within weeks of assuming office in 1977, Jayewardene at first refused to take any action: 'we do not wish to declare emergency ... it means the complete elimination of the freedoms of the people with regard to arrest, detention and legislation by gazette and avoiding parliament'. The armed forces (almost exclusively Sinhalese) reportedly encouraged attacks on Tamils in the South, while the police force (95 per cent Sinhalese) used its radio network to inflame the situation further by spreading false rumours. Soon, hundreds of Tamils were dead and thousands had fled for refuge in the North and East.

But, as yet, army and police terrorism was uncoordinated, more the random acts of individuals than a matter of concerted government policy. Within two years this was no longer the case. On 11 July 1979, in reaction to isolated Tiger attacks in the North and the killing at the beginning of July of a police officer in Jaffna, President Jayewardene appointed his nephew, Brigadier Weeratunga, as commander of the security forces in Jaffna, and ordered him to eradicate 'terrorism' within six months. On the same day, a state of emergency was declared in Jaffna, and a Public Security Ordinance gave the police and armed forces the power to dispose of dead bodies without an inquest. On the night of 14 July, six Tamil youths were taken from their homes – three

were never seen again. The mutilated bodies of two of the others were found the next day, and the sixth youth died a week later in Jaffna prison hospital.

By this time, a Prevention of Terrorism Act had been brought into operation.\* The Act, which violated the 1978 constitution on a number of grounds, gave the state the power to arrest and detain incommunicado for up to eighteen months anyone remotely suspected of 'unlawful activity' before or after the passage of the Act. 'Unlawful activity' could mean anything at all, including 'failure to inform'. Statements made under any circumstances – including torture – would now be admissible as evidence in special courts without juries. On conviction by these courts, a prison term would be a minimum of five years to life. In some instances, the death penalty could be prescribed. In addition, the Act gave the police absolute power to enter any premises without a permit, search, and seize anyone or anything. This Prevention of Terrorism Act has been roundly condemned by Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), as a gross violation of human rights, and an incitement to torture.

The state of emergency which Brigadier Weeratunga supervised for six months in the North gave Amnesty and the ICJ ample evidence for this assessment. During this period, the security forces – most of whom did not speak the language of the people in the North, and had been taught to look upon them as enemies who must be subjugated at all costs – rounded up and tortured Tamil youths. Houses were entered and searched, relatives were taken into custody until wanted men had surrendered. Villages were surrounded, and the inhabitants flushed out and interrogated. Frequent 'stop-and-search' operations were carried out on cars and buses. People who had absolutely nothing to do with any type of political activity, much less 'terrorism', were tortured with burning cigarettes, with chili powder and red ants applied to sensitive parts of their bodies, by being hung upside down by their feet, or suspended by their wrists, by having pins driven into their toes and fingers, by being deprived of food and sleep, and by being beaten repeatedly. Strictly enforced press censorship prevented these acts of state-initiated terrorism from being brought to the notice of the Sinhalese – though heroic attempts were made by groups like the Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality and the Civil Rights Movement to bring the facts to the Sinhala people and appraise them of the consequences to civil liberties. By the time the emergency was lifted in December 1979, hundreds of people, mostly young men, had been through the hands of the security forces. Many were radicalised by this direct application of state power, and sought for the first time to work for Eelam.

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\*This Act superseded the Proscribing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Law which had been introduced in 1978.

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By 1981, the Liberation Tigers had killed perhaps twenty policemen, many of them notorious torturers. In April and May of 1981, following the Neerveli bank robbery, twenty-seven men were arrested, and at least twenty-two of them, according to an Amnesty International report, tortured in a number of ways and then chained to walls at the Elephant Pass Army Camp and elsewhere for six months at a time. Against the background of relentless state repression, Jayewardene's effort to defuse the situation by calling elections for District Development Councils (DDC)\* was probably doomed from the start, even if he had not aroused Tamil suspicions by sending up a contingent of 300 specially-trained Sinhalese policemen to oversee the election proceedings in Jaffna.

The run-up to the elections was predictably violent. Tamil youth groups denounced the TULF for going along with the elections – they viewed the DDCs as toothless, and TULF cooperation as a sell-out. On 24 May, a UNP candidate was assassinated, and the army went on a rampage of looting and torture. And then, on 31 May, an unidentified gunman fired some shots at an election meeting, and the tense atmosphere exploded into state-sponsored mayhem. With several high-ranking Sinhalese security officers and two cabinet ministers, Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake (both self-confessed Sinhala supremacists), present in the town, uniformed security men and plainclothes thugs carried out some well-organised acts of destruction. They burned to the ground certain chosen targets – including the Jaffna Public Library, with its 95,000 volumes and priceless manuscripts, a Hindu Temple, the office and machinery of the independent Tamil daily newspaper *Eelanadu*, the house of the MP of Jaffna, the headquarters of the TULF, and more than 100 shops and markets. Four people were killed outright. No mention of this appeared in the national newspapers, not even the burning of the Library, the symbol of the Tamils' cultural identity.

The government delayed bringing in emergency rule until 2 June, by which time key targets had been destroyed. On 4 June, emergency rule was extended throughout the country, and lifted five days later. Meanwhile, the government had no intention of postponing elections, despite the fact that the signs were hardly auspicious. It was determined to win at least one seat in Tamil territory. On the morning of polling day, TULF leaders were arrested: they were later released, with no explanation given. After the elections, several of the ballot boxes were tampered with, and some were never produced for counting. But, in

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\*District Development Councils were introduced by the Jayewardene government as a form of local administration with central (ministerial) control!

spite of this, TULF won all the seats in Tamil areas.

After the elections were over, there was no respite for the Tamil people. While Sinhalese MPs fulminated against opposition colleagues, and discussed in parliament how to best kill them, Tamil peasants were actually being murdered by organised gangs in the border areas of Batticaloa and Amparai. During July and August, Tamils in the East and South, including the hill country plantation workers, were terrorised and made homeless. Women were raped, and at least twenty-five people perished. The attacks, many by well-organised goon squads, were widely believed to be directed by members of the ruling UNP, among them close friends of the President.

On 20 July 1981, the *Sun* newspaper announced that the government intended to set up a permanent army unit in the North which would be invested with investigative and other police powers as a matter of course, not only under emergency regulations. Eight days later, Anacottai police station, six miles from Jaffna, was attacked by Tamil youth who killed two policemen and escaped with firearms and ammunition. This was the first attack on a police station in Sri Lanka since the JVP (Janatha Vimukti Peramuna) rebellion of 1971. TULF leaders immediately condemned the attack, but the government was not mollified. Additional army units were sent to the Jaffna peninsula, bringing with them their by now well-known techniques of mass terror and torture.

Throughout the rest of 1981, under the cover of a country-wide state of emergency, the army indulged in acts of violence in Jaffna District – assaulting schoolchildren, hitting out at people on the streets, burning houses and a bookshop. In November, under the pretext of ‘hunting for terrorists’, soldiers entered an agricultural farm in Vavuniya where eleven families of plantation workers, victims of earlier hill country violence, had been settled by the Gandhiyam Society. This organisation, formed in 1976 for community and social service, had carried out most of its work among destitute Tamil refugees. Now Gandhiyam volunteer workers were assaulted by the military, and hung by their feet. A few days later, forty soldiers shot at close range a youth described in the newspapers as a ‘most wanted terrorist’ – who was at the time on bail from police custody. By the beginning of 1982, it was clear that the army intended to stay in Jaffna. To quote an eye-witness writing in the January 1982 *Tamil Times*: ‘the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, and specially the Jaffna Peninsula, presents an appearance of a recently occupied territory, army personnel and vehicle movements being evident everywhere during day and night. Almost the entirety of the armed forces of the state has been deployed, with all the modern military hardware at its disposal’.

\* \* \*

1982 is, from a safe distance, regarded as a 'quiet' year, sandwiched between the ferocity of 1981 and 1983. But in Jaffna District there was no let-up of state-directed aggression. In January, there were more attacks by soldiers, police and CID on villages harbouring displaced plantation Tamils who were under Gandhiyam's care. Again, women volunteers were abused, and the men assaulted. In March, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was made a permanent part of the law of the land, and the Minister of Defence was given the power to keep any person in custody anywhere he should determine, including the dreaded military camps. In early June, the secretary of the Vavuniya branch of the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality was arrested and tortured, shortly after the organisation had presented a memorandum to President Jayewardene denouncing the Prevention of Terrorism Act for creating 'conditions for organised acts of violence'. In August, two Tamil youths named Kuttimani and Jegan, alleged to be members of the Tigers, were sentenced to death after prolonged and vicious torture. This was the first time death sentences had been handed down under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Jayewardene meanwhile pressed ahead with the presidential election, called for 20 October. Immediately after the voting, Jayewardene declared a new state of emergency, and had the Tamil paper *Suthanthiran* sealed. He then used his enormous parliamentary majority to extend the life of the parliament, elected in 1977, until 1989 – a disfranchisement of the people for a further six years. The people were asked to confirm their disfranchisement in a referendum to be held in December.

After the presidential election, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was resorted to more frequently than ever. In mid-November, army and police arrested six Catholic priests, an Anglican priest, a Methodist minister, his brother who was a medical doctor, a University lecturer named Nithiyanandan and his wife Nirmala, a feminist political scientist and well-known dramatist who wrote plays and translated political works about the liberation struggles of people in Sri Lanka, Latin America and Africa. The government eventually brought charges under the Prevention of Terrorism Act against the Nithiyanandans, two of the Catholic priests, the Methodist minister and his brother. After this, Hindus, Muslims and Christians joined in huge demonstrations and prayer meetings pressing for their release. On 15 December, one such prayer meeting at St Anthony's Church, Vavuniya, was attacked by the police, who threw tear-gas grenades into the crowd of more than 1,000 people and then kicked and beat people with their batons and made several arrests.

\* \* \*

As 1983 dawned, then, the UNP government was armed with a massive parliamentary majority, an extension of its life until 1989 and, in its legislative armoury, the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act with which to try and crush grievances it refused to solve. But very little else was in its favour. The economy, which President Jayewardene had thrown open to western interests, was foundering. He was under increasing pressure from the IMF to devalue the currency massively, which would drive up the already high cost of living. The country had only a few months of foreign reserves left. Faced with a growing economic crisis, Jayewardene sought ways to cement his government's relationship with the United States, which had long wanted to establish a naval presence in the Eastern port of Trincomalee.

1983 was to be a tragic year for Sri Lanka. The Tamil population of the North and East had, in desperation, come to see Eelam as the only hope – however faint – for a more secure future. The government continued to blame the Tamil people for the escalating violence. In January, a UNP organiser was killed at Vavuniya; in February, a police inspector was killed; in March, an army vehicle was ambushed. In reporting these incidents, the English-language newspapers, with the exception of the *Saturday Review* (which was published in Jaffna), orchestrated a shrill campaign for more extreme and cruel measures to be taken against the Tamil people, who had to be bludgeoned into submission. The sufferings of the people, and the atrocities perpetrated against them by the army and police, were passed over in silence.

And so the way was prepared for a holocaust. In March, the security forces attacked the Gandhiyam settlement at Pannakulam in Trincomalee, and on 6 April they arrested and tortured the Gandhiyam secretary, Dr S. Rajasunderam, and president, S.A. David, accusing them of harbouring 'terrorists'. Shortly after, two young men and two young women who were distributing leaflets at Vavuniya calling for the release of Dr Rajasunderam were arrested and possibly tortured. Gandhiyam offices in the North were also shut down. Since this was the sole charitable organisation working for the rehabilitation of plantation Tamil refugees, the social implications were grave.

On 5 April, a three-day peace march in the North, demanding the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, was broken up by police with tear gas. When the marchers re-grouped at Jaffna Cathedral, they were charged by the police, and over fifty arrested.

Meanwhile, local elections were due. On 29 April, three UNP candidates were shot in Jaffna District, and the North braced itself for military retaliation. More army units were moved into position. When, on 18 May, unknown youths shot an army corporal, and then set fire to a polling booth, a state of emergency was immediately declared, during which the army carried out several 'retaliatory' strikes. In Jaffna town,

it burned houses and part of the bazaar, and army personnel fired into Jaffna hospital. The army burned to the ground the village of Kanthar-madam, and carried out random acts of violence in other parts of the district. Vavuniya was set ablaze on 1 June, the second anniversary of the burning of Jaffna Public Library. A mile outside of Vavuniya, the Gandhiyam farm at Kovikulam came under attack – its crops, farm buildings and vehicles were all destroyed by the armed forces, and twelve workers were taken in for questioning.

Within days, Public Security Regulation 15A gave the armed forces permission to dispose of bodies secretly, without a post mortem or inquest. This was the government's response to an inquest into the death in custody of a young farmer in Trincomalee, where a homicide verdict was returned by a Jaffna magistrate. Between July 1979 and June 1983, at least twenty-three Tamils died in army or police custody. At the end of May 1983, a young van-driver had been taken to Valvet-titurai army camp and shot, and an army truck driven over his body. Under the terms of Regulation 15A, no embarrassing questions could be asked about this or any subsequent case.

All indications are that the police and armed forces planned a massive assault on Tamils in the North and East during the months of June and July. In Trincomalee, at least nineteen people were killed in a spasm of police-led violence, which continued throughout July. Army and police went into houses to search for knives and weapons. Residents were taken away to unknown destinations, while houses were burnt. Hundreds of shops, as well as several temples and one Christian church, were all razed to the ground. But that was only a prelude to the terrible events of 26/27 July, when the navy ran amok in Trincomalee, killing people and burning over 200 houses.

The two-month pogrom at Trincomalee left the town in ruins, thousands homeless and over thirty dead by the end of July. There was a certain method in all of this destruction. For years, the government had been sponsoring Sinhalese settlement of Eastern Districts, determined that the Sinhalese, and not the Tamils, benefit from the Mahaveli Development scheme. By 1983, some of the Eastern Districts were becoming predominantly Sinhalese. These settlers were all too willing to take parts in acts of aggression against their Tamil neighbours, as part of their expansionist drive. The government also hoped that Sinhalese settlers could be duped into accepting an American military presence in their midst – on the grounds that what the Tamils saw as bad must be viewed as good by the Sinhalese.

But the influx of plantation Tamils who had fled earlier hill country violence was upsetting government plans. In order for the Sinhalese to become a majority in the East, paving the way for a deal with America, the plantation Tamils had to be chased away. Hence, the continuing attacks on Gandhiyam farms where they were being looked after, and the



action taken by the security forces on 26/27 July and again on 3/4 August, when Tamils were taken away from refugee camps by the truckload, and dumped miles from Trincomalee in the hill country.

In July, *Suthanthiran* and *Saturday Review* were closed down by the government. Whilst knowledge of the atrocities against the Tamil people was being suppressed within the country, Sri Lanka was attracting the attention of the international press. In an unguarded moment, Jayewardene was to tell the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in Colombo: 'I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna people now.' In the weeks that followed, the Jaffna people learned exactly what he meant. It is probable that the government was awaiting some incident which could serve as a pretext for massive bloodletting in the District. The pretext occurred when thirteen soldiers were killed.

While President Jayewardene remained silent for four days, the army and police in Jaffna killed people at will. Between fifty and one hundred died in the North during the massacres of 23/24 July and 26/27 July, including children and an 83-year-old teacher. In some areas, students were lined up and shot; elsewhere, people were shot at random as they passed in their cars.

The horrors of Jaffna were matched by atrocities committed around the country – either by the police and armed forces, or by well-prepared gangs of thugs who seemed to have been deliberately inflamed by the publicity given to the projected state funeral for the thirteen dead soldiers. All of Sri Lanka was turned into a battleground in which there was only one army – the rampaging Sinhalese, their rage clearly manipulated by UNP members. Tamil industries, shops and homes were laid waste, as the mobs killed, looted and raped with abandon.

The government sat silent during days of terror. It sat silent when one of the most horrendous crimes of the country's history was being perpetrated in Colombo's high security Welikade prison. On 25 July, while the city lay under a total curfew and helicopters circled the prison roof, between 300 and 400 armed prisoners massacred thirty-seven political prisoners: all Tamils held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act who had been transferred to Colombo for 'security' reasons. Among the dead were Kuttimani and Jegan, both symbols of Tamil resistance. Two days later, without government silence being broken, the same macabre nightmare was re-enacted, and eighteen political prisoners were butchered in the prison, including the Gandhiyam Society's Dr Rajasunderam. A senior minister later said that the Sinhalese were only 'pacified' after the massacre at Welikade.

Jayewardene, when he broke his silence on 28 July, spoke to much the same effect. He expressed no sorrow for what had befallen the country; he had no words of sympathy for the victims. Instead, the anti-Tamil violence was deemed a just retribution for the death of the thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. The President did not call on the security

forces to restore law and order, and bring the looters and arsonists under control. His message was quite a different one: he warned the Tamil people that, under a new law, anyone who refused to sign a declaration disavowing separatism could suffer loss of property, travel documents and be barred from public examinations. The tone of the speech fuelled the fury of the mobs, and violence flared up with a new vehemence on 29 July.

In the week which followed, parliament approved an amendment to the constitution banning any political party which advocated secession. Three opposition parties, and several newspapers, were immediately outlawed. A Rehabilitation of Property and Industries Authority was then set up under an emergency regulation to take 'affected' property into state control – that is, Tamil-owned houses, shops, commercial buildings, restaurants and factories – thereby intensifying the economic depredation inflicted by mobs and security forces on the Tamil population.

By mid-August, it was evident that at least 150,000 people had been made refugees by the latest pogrom, and over 1,000 – perhaps as many as 3,000 – had perished. In the aftermath of the havoc, the army and police continued to harass the Tamil population. Their immediate target was the Eastern District of Batticaloa, where a massive Sinhala 'invasion' of Tamil villages was underway from early September, led by the MP for Polonnaruwa. As many as 8,000 Sinhalese chased away the Tamil inhabitants of several villages and appropriated 3,000 tents sent by international relief agencies for Tamil refugees. While this was going on, the army and police lent a hand: shooting one man dead and arresting up to 170 Tamils under the terms of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. As far as security forces were concerned, it was also business as usual in the North. On 30 September, the air force went to a farm in Vavuniya belonging to the area's MP and beat to death the farm-manager and a youth. Their bodies were burned and the MP arrested.

The collapse of the All-Party Conference – summoned to meet on 20 January 1984 in response to an initiative taken by India, and aborted soon after – demonstrated that the UNP government would consider nothing short of a 'military solution' to the national minority problem. At the conference, the Sinhala delegates came out adamantly against any form of regional autonomy for the North and East. Before and after the conference, there were the usual acts of violence perpetrated by the army and police. On 15 January in Vavuniya, residents were assaulted and their homes torn apart during military 'searches'. A former sub-inspector of the police, who had been a key witness against the police force to the Sansoni Commission (set up to investigate the communal violence of 1977), was arrested and then released, while his son was detained. Tamil refugees from the hill country were harassed

and expelled from Vavuniya, and civilians on the street subjected to random attack. Arrests of students were frequent in early 1984, and on 22 February, the army attacked a bus carrying fifteen National Youth Council members from Jaffna to a conference, forcing it to turn back. The police/army extended their practice of taking relatives of wanted men as hostages during this time. They tended to ignore proper procedures of registering those under arrest. It appears that at least 250 Tamils were taken into police custody or into army camps in the opening months of the year.

\* \* \*

With the extension of the emergency by parliament on 23 February, it seemed that the Tamil population was in store for a prolonged period of despotic rule. One MP said as much during the debate on the emergency, claiming that 'there were anti-terrorist laws which were adequate to deal with terrorism and the extension of the emergency would only pave the way for a dictatorship'.

From this time on, there were some ominous new features in the government's handling of the security situation. In mid-March, Sinhalese residents in Jaffna District – who had never been molested or harassed by their Tamil neighbours – were suddenly evacuated without any explanation. Simultaneously, there was a large troop movement North. Military torture camps, which had been closed in late 1983, were re-opened as the security forces began to comb neighbourhoods for anyone whom they could suspect of 'unlawful activity'. Searches were no longer sporadic, but carried out in a methodical way, with houses, streets and entire areas being surrounded by military personnel, who would burst into houses and round up and interrogate the inhabitants, taking several away at a time. This systematic 'saturation' approach to security was coupled in the public mind with the appointment on 23 March of an Oxford-educated lawyer, Lalith Athulathmudali, as Minister for National Security. Immediately after his appointment, Athulathmudali got the blessing of some Buddhist priests for his war 'to wipe out Tamil terrorism'. A few days later, a contingent of air force men ran into the market of Chunnakam, six miles from Jaffna town, shooting in all directions. They killed ten people and injured fifty, and continued to fire at random as they moved to neighbouring villages. At one point, they fired into a crowd of schoolchildren, injuring thirty-two.

As usual, the government maintained that this was a 'revenge' shooting, in retaliation for an alleged 'ambush' by the Tigers – but this time there had been no ambush, or provocation of any kind. After the murder at Chunnakam, Athulathmudali pulled out all the propaganda stops at his command, and launched a campaign of disinformation to

cover up the atrocity.

More and more security personnel – many of them trained in guerilla warfare in Malaysia and the West, including Britain – were stationed in the North, leading Tamils to fear that a ‘final solution’ was in the offing, with Sinhalese storm-troopers doing the bidding of right-wing politicians. According to the *Saturday Review*, the secret deal with the United States had given Jayewardene a new confidence, and made him anxious to ‘solve’ the Tamil question once and for all. And so the next act of brutality unfolded. After a series of intensive house-to-house searches, and the destruction of two community centres in early April, on 9 April the army began to fire at random on civilians in Jaffna town. Before the day was over, the Jaffna Co-operative Store and many other buildings had been burnt down, and the Church of Our Lady of Refuge was bombarded with cannon fire!

Athulathmudali used this attack to spread further anti-Tamil propaganda. He alleged that the church had been a centre for terrorist activity and that the clergy had approved the action. The Bishop of Jaffna called these press statements ‘tendentious’ and condemned the minister for not ‘checking up the facts’. The attack on the church had been an unprovoked attack by the army – but this fact was kept from the international press. What they were handed was an account of a Tamil attack on a Buddhist *vihara*. (In fact, the parishioners of Our Lady of Refuge – mainly local fishermen – had been so angry that they had attacked the *vihara* in retaliation.) The intention was clearly to blemish the reputation of Tamil people who had won the sympathy of the western media. For it was well known that since 1958, and despite the many attacks on their places of worship, Tamil activists had never retaliated in a like manner.

On the morning of 11 April, the burnt bodies of sixteen Tamil civilians were found in a culvert and four other burnt bodies discovered near a railway level-crossing. The next day, at least seventeen more civilians were shot and killed by the army, and three burned alive in their car. A total news blackout was imposed, and most of Sri Lanka remained oblivious to the new round of terror, in which an estimated 200 people died.

During the following few weeks, the horrors continued unabated. On 22 April, the navy attacked a boat at sea and arrested six people, of whom one died in custody and another had to be hospitalised. A further thirteen bodies were washed ashore at Point Pedro a few days later. On 24 April, a young man was killed by the army at Gurunager, and a week later, in Batticaloa, a youth in army custody was shot dead. On 2 May, presumably in retaliation for the shooting of a police officer, a Hindu temple was damaged and two shops in Point Pedro market were bombed. Meanwhile, the security forces have cordoned off villages and taken hostages. Hundreds of new arrests have been

made in the North and East

Athulathmudali and the UNP government have determined to contain the 'Tamil problem' to Jaffna – they cannot afford economically or politically a recurrence of the widespread communal violence that almost wrecked the country in 1983. The government has decided to wipe out 'terrorism' once and for all. (A spokesman even went on radio to warn the Sinhalese people not to take the law into their own hands since the government was going to crack down in the North.) And for that purpose, the government has called in foreign specialist anti-guerrilla forces from Israel – a country with which Sri Lanka severed diplomatic relations fourteen years ago.

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What is the rule of law worth in Sri Lanka today? The signs are that the UNP government is preparing the way for a one-party state, and that it will have no hesitation in applying emergency legislation and the Prevention of Terrorism Act to anyone, Sinhala or Tamil, who speaks out against its policies. It will have at hand the machinery of repression to deal ruthlessly with strikes and any kind of organised dissent. But another future is also possible. Perhaps the armed forces, which have for so long terrorised 20 per cent of the population, will refuse to be reined in by the civilian Sinhalese politicians. All Sri Lanka, not just the North and East, may today be living in the shadow of a looming military dictatorship.

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# Notes and documents

## Human rights violations in Sri Lanka\*

Sri Lanka, even though it is one of the poorest nations in the world, has had a unique record among post-colonial states. A parliamentary democracy with full adult franchise has flourished in the Island since 1931; a multi-party system has been operative and governments have been replaced through free and fair elections. Political dissent has been expressed through the parliamentary process, trade unions and a relatively free press.

The general elections of 1977 marked a major turning-point in Sri Lanka's modern history. The Sri Lankan people expressed their dissatisfaction with the government of Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike by giving the United National Party (UNP), led by J.R. Jayewardene, a clear and massive mandate to take over the reins of government. Mrs Bandaranaike's government was marked by increasing signs of autocratic rule, evidence of nepotism, political victimisation and rumours of widespread corruption and abuse of power. Jayewardene promised to establish a *Dharmista* (righteous) society, according to the noblest ideals of Buddhist social philosophy. He promised clean government and unimpeachable ethical conduct in public life; respect for the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the freedom of the press. The UNP also stated in its manifesto that it would open up the economy and invite foreign investment to create jobs, while generally maintaining existing welfare measures (such as subsidised

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\* These notes are based on the 'Memorandum on Human Rights Violations and Ethnic Violence in Sri Lanka' produced by the Gemeenschappelijk Overleg Medefinancierings Organisaties (The Netherlands, December 1983), with additional notes added by Jenny Bourne.

food, free medical and educational services, cheap public transport, etc.) that have marked Sri Lanka's policies since independence.

Six years of UNP rule have, in fact, been a record of cynical disregard and betrayal of electoral promises solemnly made. The pogrom against innocent Tamil civilians throughout the Island in July 1983 was not an aberration in Lankan society, as government spokesmen in the Island and abroad would like to maintain; it was the savage culmination of a style of government resorted to by J.R. Jayewardene, in which there was scant regard for the rule of law or the welfare of the poorest sections of the population, in which tactics of terror were used to intimidate political opponents, particularly the Tamil national minority.

Today, the menace of authoritarian rule looms over the country. This report attempts to highlight the main features of the 'constitutional dictatorship' now prevailing in Sri Lanka.

## **Constitutional manipulation**

### *1 The constitution of 1978*

Within a year of its coming into power, the UNP government rushed a new constitution through parliament, within a record period of three weeks. No constituent assembly was called, there was not even an all-party committee, and there was no opportunity for the general public to make submissions or amendments. The new constitution, on paper, marks a substantial advance in comparison to previous constitutions. It contains a comprehensive chapter on fundamental rights and measures to enforce them. The constitution includes provisions concerning the rights of minorities\* and, for the first time as a constitutional provision, the prohibition of torture.

However, Article 15 also provides for the restrictions of these selfsame rights in the interests of 'national security'. Such restriction

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\* The UNP election manifesto had this to say on Tamil grievances: 'The United National Party accepts the position that there are numerous problems confronting the Tamil-speaking people. The lack of a solution to their problems has made the Tamil-speaking people even support a movement for the creation of a separate state. In the interest of national integration and unity so necessary for the economic development of the whole country, the party feels such problems *should be solved without delay* [emphasis added]. The party, when it comes to power, will take all possible steps to remedy the grievances in such fields as (1) Education (2) Colonisation (3) Use of Tamil Language (4) Employment in the Public and Semi-Public Corporations. We will summon an all-party conference as started earlier and implement its decisions.'

Once the UNP came to power with a landslide victory, with massive support from the Tamil voters, it did not keep its electoral promises and call an all-party conference. The victory was marked by violent attacks on opposition leaders and supporters by UNP thugs and culminated in savage attacks on Tamil civilians from mid-August to mid-September 1977. The demand for a separate state has now been constitutionally banned.



may be imposed on, for example, the presumption of innocence, the principle of non-retroactivity, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of movement, the right to equality before the law and freedom from arbitrary arrest.

## 2 *Some features of the new constitution*

(a) *Proportional representation*: The new constitution introduced the system of proportional representation, replacing the former 'first past the post' British system, by which the UNP itself was elected to power. However, the new constitution also stipulated that, in future, no changes of constitution could take place without a two-thirds majority in parliament. A study of past election statistics shows that it is highly unlikely that any party in the future would capture two-thirds of the seats in parliament. The UNP came to power with 143 of the 168 seats in the legislature, but with 51 per cent of the popular vote. The new electoral system introduced by the constitution means that it cannot be changed by the same electoral support that brought it into being! To this extent, the power of the Sri Lankan voter has been diminished. However, the constitution has since been amended to suspend proportional representation and revert to the old (repealed) system, for by-elections, during the government's extended term of office.

(b) *Executive presidency*: The new constitution created an Executive Presidency and Mr J.R. Jayewardene constituted himself as Sri Lanka's first Executive President. The constitution gives the President wide powers, making him virtually independent of parliament. He has the power to dissolve parliament, whilst he himself cannot be removed except by election or, on certain specific grounds, by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. The President is head of state, head of cabinet and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He has the right to arrogate ministeries to himself and may rule for limited periods of time by decree during times of emergency. The President himself may determine what constitutes a national emergency, though answerable to parliament within a specified time.

(c) *Guarantees for foreign investment*: The new constitution provides that where parliament by a two-thirds majority approves any treaty or agreement entered into by the government with the government of a foreign state, for the promotion or protection of the latter's investments in Sri Lanka, its companies or nationals, then such a treaty shall have the force of law and no future law shall be enacted, nor executive or administrative action be taken, in contravention of such a treaty or agreement. Thus, while this government has written into the constitution provisions for restricting the fundamental rights of its own people, no provisions are made to impose restrictions under comparable circumstances on foreign investors.

(d) *Amendments to the constitution*: Once the new constitution was passed through the legislature, the UNP adopted a machiavellian attitude towards it. It has displayed a cynical willingness to change its own laws, whenever they got in its way. The constitution has been amended six times; not to widen or enhance the rights of the citizens, but in each case to manipulate the franchise and the electoral process.

(e) *The 1982 referendum – eclipse of parliamentary democracy*: The constitution was amended to enable the President to bring forward the presidential elections. The 1978 constitution had stipulated that presidential elections be held at regular six-year intervals. By late 1982, the UNP was more than half way through its term of office, and there were growing signs of popular disillusion with it. The party had not kept its electoral promise of calling an all-party conference to settle 'without delay' the just grievances of the Tamil people. The people were beginning to feel the pinch of the government's economic policies. Under these circumstances, J.R. Jayewardene asked parliament to amend the constitution, to advance the presidential election to any time after four years. This was presented as a highly democratic move. The President was not postponing elections but advancing them! He also solemnly promised that after the presidential election, he would dissolve parliament and hold a general election.

Jayewardene won the election, polling 42.3 per cent of the registered votes – 20 per cent of the voters abstained. After his victory, the President decided to hold a referendum to postpone general elections for six years by amending the constitution again. The reason given for the referendum was the 'discovery' by the President of a threat to his life and a plot to overthrow the government, by a group of 'Naxalites' – a group within the main opposition party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). These persons were taken into custody and a state of emergency declared. The referendum was then held, with a state of emergency prevailing; with the main organisers of the opposition party behind bars; and the President's main opponent, Mrs Bandaranaike, prevented from taking part. Once the referendum was held, the threat to the government seems to have disappeared as mysteriously as it had emerged! A police enquiry into the alleged conspiracy could come up with no evidence against the accused.

The referendum was held in an atmosphere of violence and intimidation of the opposition, unprecedented in Sri Lankan electoral history. The Civil Rights Movement of Sri Lanka has issued a statement documenting serious abuses of power by the ruling party during the referendum. The whole shameful charade calls into question the legitimacy of the UNP's present term of office.

## Tinkering with the judiciary

Sri Lanka has justly prided itself on possessing a remarkably independent and impartial judiciary, irrespective of the government in power. The conduct of the present government gives cause for great concern about the survival of an independent judiciary.

### 1 *The first blow – the new constitution*

All three constitutions of post-independence Sri Lanka have built in safeguards to ensure the independence of the judiciary from the executive and legislature. One such provision is the guarantee of tenure of office to judges. The new constitution of 1978 (Article 163) enacted that judges of the Supreme and High Courts would cease to hold office on the commencement of the new constitution. In one blow the government had sacked all the judges! By compelling the judges to take an oath to uphold and maintain the new constitution on re-appointment, the UNP government effectively placed the legality of the constitution outside judicial review. President Jayewardene then re-constituted the New Supreme Court and Court of Appeal, but seven judges of the old Supreme Court and several judges of the High Court remained dismissed.

### 2 *Special Presidential Commission of Enquiry*

By the constitution of 1972, disciplinary control of judges and other officers administering justice was vested in the Judicial Services Disciplinary Board, composed of the Chief Justice and other Supreme Court judges. The new constitution (Article 81) provided a special (Presidential) Commission of Enquiry and also made the conduct of judges a subject of inquiry by this Commission. This has opened the door for political control of judges.

### 3 *Mrs Bandaranaike's application for a writ of prohibition*

Mrs Bandaranaike's conduct of affairs as Prime Minister was made the subject of inquiry by the Special Presidential Commission. She made an application for a writ of prohibition, which was granted by the Court of Appeal. The government then passed ad hoc legislation to declare this judgement null and void and ordered the Commission to continue its work as if no court order had been made. The Act also blocked any possible appeal against the findings of the Commission to the Supreme Court.

### 4 *Contempt of Court*

On 3 December 1982 an organisation of clergymen, called *Pavidi Handa* (the Voice of the Clergy), held a meeting to express views critical of the announced referendum. A police officer, with some of his men, entered the meeting and dispersed the participants. Later, on 8

December 1982, 2,000 copies of a *Pavidi Handa* document were confiscated.

A Buddhist monk, a member of the organisation, made an application to the Supreme Court against the action of the police officer. The Court held that the officer had been guilty of a violation of fundamental rights and ordered him to pay a fine of Rs. 10,000/ = . The government responded to this verdict by paying the officer's fine and promoting him! In June 1983, the Supreme Court again determined that the arrest of an opposition politician, Mrs V. Goonewardene, in the course of a demonstration, was an infringement of her fundamental rights. The police officer concerned was promoted within 24 hours! The government's justification of such actions was 'to ensure that police officers follow orders without fear of consequences from adverse court decisions'.

### 5 *Intimidation of the judiciary*

(a) *Black day for the judiciary*: After the judgement of the Goonewardene case, on 11 June 1983, a black day for the judiciary and democracy in Sri Lanka, a pro-government mob (brought in Ceylon Transport Board buses) surrounded the residence of the three judges who had heard the case, shouting abusive language and intimidating the judges. Appeals to the police from judges fell on deaf ears and no police protection was given.

(b) *Oath against separatism*: During the violence of July 1983, the President maintained silence for four days. He then appeared on national TV to announce an amendment to the constitution banning any demand for separatism. Even though he made it appear that this legislation was necessitated by a grave situation of national emergency, the Solicitor-General admitted to the Constitutional Court that 'the proposed Bill was under consideration *even before the outbreak of violence*' (emphasis added) (*Ceylon Daily News* 4 August 1983). The Bill made it a constitutional requirement that all those in the service of the state take an oath disavowing separatism within a specified period (thirty days) of the Bill becoming law. Once the Bill went to parliament, an amendment to it was added at the committee stage, introducing a mandatory clause that the judges of the Supreme and Appeal Courts should take their oath before the President.

The judges, however, according to the law as presented to them and following existing tradition, had taken the oaths before each other. Once the thirty days had passed, and without any warning that they had been remiss, the Attorney-General ruled that the judges of the Supreme and Appeal Courts had ceased to hold office after 7 September 1983 as they had not taken their oaths, as required by law, before the Chief Executive! The country was involved in an

unprecedented legal tangle, generating serious misgivings and fears on the part of the legal profession and the general public. The President, it was reported, would strictly adhere to the new constitutional requirement that the judges should have taken their oaths before him. Rumours were afloat that this was a move on the part of the President to get rid of certain judges, including the Chief Justice, who it was suspected had become *persona non grata*.\*

The judges were subjected to humiliation and ignominy. They were locked out of their Chambers, and police were posted to prevent entry. The judges, including the Chief Justice, were even denied the right to remove their own papers from their Chambers. Their official cars were withdrawn, as was the police protection given to guard their residences. The president of the Bar Association appealed to the President to revise the ruling of the Attorney-General, expressing grave concern on the part of the Sri Lankan Bar. The situation was critical, threatening to undermine the very foundations of the judiciary. The President, however, 're-appointed' all the judges, including the Chief Justice, after they had dutifully taken the oath before him. It was subsequently ruled that their original oath was actually in order.

### **Repression of legal opposition and dissent**

#### *1 Civil disabilities imposed on Mrs Bandaranaike*

Soon after the promulgation of the new constitution, Mrs Bandaranaike was the subject of inquiry by the Special Presidential Commission. Mrs Bandaranaike applied to the Court of Appeal for a writ of prohibition against the inquiry. The Court of Appeal allowed her application. The government then used its steam-roller majority to amend the constitution. It also stipulated that the Supreme Court would have no jurisdiction if parliament had already taken steps to disenfranchise or expel anyone from parliament on the basis of the findings of the Commission. The Commission found Mrs Bandaranaike guilty of 'abuse of power' and the government parliamentary group voted unanimously to impose severe civic disabilities on Mrs Bandaranaike and debar her from parliament, for a period of seven years.

The day after Mrs Bandaranaike was expelled from parliament, the government again used its majority to amend the Parliamentary Elections Act and the Presidential Elections Act, prohibiting any person who had been expelled from parliament from participating in any election during the period of disqualification (this included even speaking

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\* Chief Justice Neville Samarakoon has since been suspended from his post on account of a speech he made at a private award ceremony at a Colombo factory in which he discussed wages and job prospects. A parliamentary select committee is being appointed to investigate his conduct with a view to impeachment.

or canvassing on behalf of a candidate). This amendment also disqualifies any candidate on whose behalf such a person may have participated.

According to the normal law of the land, a person may be disqualified from participation, only if found guilty of a corrupt practice *by a Court of Law, after a fair trial, on legal evidence of a precisely defined offence* proved beyond reasonable doubt; such persons have *a right of appeal*. All these rights were denied Mrs Bandaranaike.

## 2 *Crippling the trade unions*

Sri Lanka has had a vigorous trade union movement and this is partly responsible for the advanced system of welfare service for which it is justly famous among Third World countries. (It must be mentioned that almost all the trade unions have political affiliations, the UNP itself controlling one of the largest unions – the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS) .)

(a) The *Greater Colombo Economic Commission* law makes the area (Free Trade Zone) coming under the jurisdiction of the GCEC a country within a country. Not only do the workers in this area not enjoy the fundamental right of association; they are liable to arbitrary dismissal, coercion and harassment by foreign companies.

(b) In 1979 the government passed a very drastic law, the *Essential Services Act*, which outlaws strikes in essential services and the government sector. It provides for severe punishments for offences under the act, including fines, jail sentences, confiscation of property and the strange and unique punishment of striking the name of any offender who happens to be a professional person off the register of his or her profession.

(c) In 1980, the first trial of strength took place between the unions and the government. Cutbacks in welfare and the high cost of living (60 per cent inflation) were creating severe hardships for the workers. 4,000 trade union delegates met in Colombo to formulate certain demands, including a wage increase of Rs. 300/=. These demands were presented to the government. The government adopted a hard line and refused to talk to the workers' representatives.

The Joint Trade Union Action Committee (JTUAC) decided to stage a day of protest, marked by a half-day token strike on 5 June. President Jayewardene then called upon the members of the JSS to organise a counter-demonstration on the same day. This was highly irregular conduct for a head of state. The counter-demonstrators attacked the strikers and a prominent unionist, Mr D. Somapala, the father of five young children, was killed.

Industrial unrest continued and the JTUAC decided on 11 July to call for a general strike on 18 July. The government introduced emergency rule on the night of 16 July and declared every imaginable enterprise, both public and private, an 'essential service'. The JTUAC had announced a meeting for 18 July to explain their case to the public. The government banned all public meetings on the 18th, but itself went on to hold a mass meeting on that very day! At this meeting the President announced that the workers who had absented themselves from work that day were dismissed from their jobs. The total number of workers who lost their jobs that day has been estimated to be between 80,000 and 100,000.\*

### 3 *The press*

The state control of the mass media, set in motion by the previous government, has been extended and perfected under the UNP. Of the major newspaper groups in Sri Lanka, Associated Newspapers of Ceylon is state-owned, and the Times Group is state-controlled. The radio and TV are also state-controlled enterprises. In 1981 a Newspaper Ordinance was passed, compelling all papers to deposit a large sum as insurance against defamation. The sum was to be determined by the cabinet and the law clearly aimed at putting small, low-budget (and hence independent) papers out of business.

Not surprisingly, almost without exception, the national mass media has toed the government line, slanting its coverage and suppressing information so as to benefit and justify the government. Those that have attempted to take an independent and objective line have been forcibly suppressed. This has been most clearly seen in the coverage of matters relating to the Tamil question and the behaviour of the state's armed forces.

The Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Education published its own document *Emergency '79* on the violence in Jaffna because it was so concerned that 'the essential facts were suppressed by Government censorship and by the self-censorship of the state-controlled media'. (Every state of emergency automatically involves state censorship and prevents information from the North reaching the South.) Papers such as *Suthanthiran* and *Saturday Review*, which have exposed the extent of the repression in the North and were avidly read both in the South and overseas, were summarily closed down by the government in June 1983. (*Aththa*, the Communist party paper, was also closed down during the referendum campaign.) *Saturday Review*, which has been allowed to publish again since February 1984, works under censorship

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\* Some have never been reinstated and the 40,000 who have been were asked to prove that they had not participated in the strike and give written assurances that they would refrain from action in the future.

rules which are so stringent that its (Sinhalese!) editor asked the readers whether they thought there was any point in publishing at all.

The suppression of information critical of the government extends to foreign journalists and agencies. Jayewardene expelled journalist David Selbourne in June 1983, smearing him as a marxist trouble-maker, and a month later a UPI journalist was expelled for exposing Jayewardene's call for foreign arms. *Amnesty International* and the British *Guardian*, which have both published damning reports on the violence against the Tamils, have been discredited in the Sri Lankan parliament and press.

But the papers in the South of Sri Lanka do not always totally suppress information; often, they just omit certain important facts in a particular story. For example, the Council for Communal Harmony Through the Media (CCHTM) found in a survey of the press coverage of racial violence in the summer of 1981 that when police teams were sent to Jaffna to investigate the excesses of the police, after they had burnt down the Jaffna Public Library and the market (as a result of which a number of police were transferred), the Sinhala and English papers covered the fact of the inquiry but omitted to state the reason for it. And only one paper published the news releases of the left parties which exposed the irregularities at the District Development Council (DDC) elections. When the Prevention of Terrorism Act was made law in March 1982, only one out of four Sinhala papers discussed the issues involved. The CCHTM concluded: 'The Tamil reader was kept better informed about the human rights aspect of this piece of legislation, while the Sinhalese and English readers did not get any such help from the papers they patronise.' Although all papers covered the killing of thirteen soldiers in the North on 23 July 1983, not one carried a story about the revenge attack by soldiers in which at least sixty civilians are thought to have lost their lives.

Whilst the press has systematically suppressed and omitted information on the Tamils, it has, by careful selection of facts and headlines, sought to justify the Sinhalese state's position, and in some cases even sought to incite communalism. The *Island*, reporting in January 1982 on the ICJ's report on the communal violence of 1981, gave prominence to one paragraph of the whole report with the headline, 'Sinhalese have a minority complex'. Research carried out by the CCHTM reveals that the Sinhala press often selects headlines and items which speak directly to Sinhalese fears. Thus, in June 1981, when communal violence was at its height, such papers stressed Sinhala Buddhist unity. While omitting any reference to state violence and the reason for the investigation into the Jaffna police, they instead reported on 'terrorists', Tamil youth activities and discredited the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and its leadership – by implication, the police had been sent to investigate terrorism! Speeches by



Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake (both virulent communalists) were reported prominently.

It looks increasingly as though, since July 1983, the mass media has been used directly by the government to spread downright lies and propaganda. For example, the *Sun* on 25 July reported (on official authority) that the funerals of the soldiers were to be held at Kanatte when the Prime Minister himself was later to say that a decision had been taken against such a move. The result was the massing of angry Sinhalese mobs. J.R. Jayewardene used the media repeatedly to exonerate himself from blame – resorting to quite obvious untruths – he did not find out about the Welikade massacre until it was too late to hold inquests, he did not know about the excesses of his armed forces in Jaffna, but he did know that the pogrom of July 1983 had been part of a left-wing plot.

The appointment of Athulathmudali as Minister of Internal Security is significant, for he is making almost daily broadcasts and press statements on the situation in the North, controlling the information reaching the Sinhalese South and foreign journalists. And this information, as two recent events reveal, is blatantly used to conceal the real activities of the security forces. For example, when the air force opened fire at Chunnakam, killing nine people at random, the Minister explained the incident to the *Island* as the air force firing at terrorists on roof tops and bullets somehow ‘straying’ to ground level, killing civilians. A Catholic church in Jaffna was shelled by cannon on 9 April. Athulathmudali told the press it had been used by terrorists and that the clergy had accepted the need for the attack. The Bishop of Jaffna, in a letter to the President, denied both statements and criticised the Minister for not checking his facts before making such a ‘damaging statement’.

## Politics of terror

### 1 *Goon squads*

The use of the police or pro-government supporters to harass, humiliate and intimidate the opposition is not a phenomenon peculiar to this government – that of Mrs Bandaranaike was well known for its recourse to these methods. But under the present government this phenomenon has assumed an alarming new dimension, in the highly organised and systematic way in which goon squads are made use of for political purposes. These squads are organised in two ways. UNP parliamentarians are known to have a permanent squad of vigilantes in their electoral districts, made up of UNP youth leaders and well-known local thugs. In addition, vigilante squads drawn from the UNP’s trade union, the JSS, have been organised in each government corporation.

These squads function as para-military units, exercising pro-government discipline, and do not hesitate to use violence to achieve their ends. The Sri Lankan police generally do not interfere when these squads are deployed to break up anti-government protest meetings, demonstrations or industrial action by workers. It is now becoming evident that the attack on innocent Tamil civilians in the last week of July 1983 was spearheaded by some of these goon squads.

The Civil Rights Movement of Sri Lanka has documented instances of violence where goon squads have been used for political purposes. The way these squads operate is frighteningly reminiscent of Hitler's SA. The pogrom against the Tamil population in fact recalls the notorious Kristall Nacht attack on innocent Jews.

(a) *Post-election violence – July 1977*: Incidents of intimidation, assault, arson and murder were so widespread that an official Committee of Inquiry was appointed to look into the allegations. Over 5,600 complaints were said to have been received by the Committee; a frequent allegation was that the police did not intervene to prevent such violations of law, but remained passive observers. The Committee of Inquiry submitted its report to the government; this document has not been made public. (Civil Rights Movement (CRM) E 3/10/79 and E 05A/10/81)

(b) *Communal violence of August/September 1977*: The report of the Sansoni Commission appointed to investigate these incidents has documented cases of:

- assault, arson and looting when police were present, but did not intervene; *and*
- assault by the police themselves.

Any actions taken by the government on the findings of this Commission have not been made public. (CRM E 05A/10/81)

The passing of the Indemnity Act of 1982 gives immunity to ministers, public officers, members of the security forces and to persons acting under their authority in respect of acts committed during the communal disturbances of August 1977 'with a view of restoring law and order'. This, in fact, affected proceedings pending in the courts in respect of certain alleged unlawful arrests.

(c) *The plantation workers*: In 1977 the plantation workers were for the first time victims of communal gang violence. Their line rooms were burnt, their few possessions looted, their women 'gang raped'. Hundreds were killed and over 40,000 became destitute and refugees. In the communal violence of 1981 yet another 40,000 plantation Tamils were displaced. Many of them settled in the Northern area around Vavuniya, where they cleared land and began to eke out a living. But in

June 1983, the army and police systematically destroyed the offices and equipment of the Gandhiyam Society – the main organisation helping the refugees. Gandhiyam's leaders were taken into custody. Dr Rajasunderam, its secretary, was murdered in Welikade jail. Tamil plantation workers who had settled around Trincomalee were also attacked in June and their homes were burnt to the ground. In July 1983, hundreds were herded into army trucks and jeeps, transported half-way across the country and dumped in Nuwara Eliya.

(d) *Attacks on pickets and demonstrators*: Demonstrations by trade unions and pickets in

- March 1978, against the government's White Paper on Employment relations,
  - January 1980, against a government decision to reduce the number of holidays previously enjoyed,
  - June 1980, in preparation for the general strike
- were all attacked by thugs. No police protection was afforded to the pickets. (CRM E 01/1/80 and E 05A/10/81)

(e) *Assaults on university students*: Students at

- the Vidyalkankara Campus in March 1978,
  - the Katubedde Campus in April 1978,
  - the Polgolla Campus in February 1979,
  - the Vidyodaya Campus in March 1979,
  - the Colombo Campus in March 1980,
  - the Kelaniya University in June 1980,
  - the Peradeniya University in April 1983
- have been attacked by thugs brought in from outside. In some of these incidents, police are known to have participated in the attacks. (CRM E 05/A/10/81)

(f) *Disruption of meetings*: Meetings of

- The Sri Lanka Freedom Party at Hyde Park, Colombo, in October 1977,
  - the United Left Front at Jaffna in February 1978,
  - the Public Services United Nurses Union at Narahenpita, Colombo, in July 1981,
  - the Sinhala Bala Mandalaya in Colombo in 1982
- were disrupted by thugs.

The last mentioned of these was being addressed by Dr E.R. Sarathchandra, a notable Sinhala intellectual, on the impact of external influences on present-day Sinhala culture. The meeting was disrupted and Dr Sarathchandra himself was assaulted. Complaints to the police against these disruptions have been totally ineffective. Several other meetings, for example, one organised by the *Pavidi*

*Handa* (Voice of the Clergy) at Gampaha in December 1982, have been prevented from being held by thuggery (CRM E 05A/10/81).

(g) *The Jaffna Development Council elections*: Elections to the Jaffna Development Council, held in June 1981, were marked by blatant irregularities. A number of ballot boxes were forcibly removed and not received at the counting centres. The burning of the Jaffna Public Library on 31 May 1981 and the sacking of many buildings in Jaffna, following the shooting of two police officers, affected the climate in which these elections were held. No offenders have been brought to book for any of these offences. (CRM E 01/6/81 and E 02/6/81)

(h) *Assaults on women*: The police are alleged to have assaulted:  
 – women strikers in garment industries at Ekala,  
 – women demonstrators on International Women's Day in March 1983.

Women teacher trainees demonstrating at Maharagama and a nurses' meeting at Narahenpita were attacked by thugs. (CRM E 03/4/83 and E 05/10/81)

(i) *Referendum of December 1982*: Election laws relating to publicity for meetings and the exhibition of symbols were openly flouted by supporters of the ruling party. Specific complaints to the police were disregarded. The campaign and the polling were vitiated by flagrant acts of abuse; polling observers of opposition parties were intimidated, harassed and prevented from attending the poll; voters were intimidated and prevented from recording their votes; polling officials were intimidated; impersonation of voters was carried out on a mass scale. (CRM E 07/11/82, E 03/12/82 and E 02/1/83)

## 2 *State terrorism against the Tamil national minority*

The failure of political leaders, during four decades, to bring about reforms on behalf of the Tamil people has led to the emergence of a militant Tamil youth movement in the North. Since 1977 there has been an escalating spiral of violence in the North and East: selective violence on the part of the Tamil militants, and indiscriminate violence against Tamil civilians.

The almost exclusively Sinhala armed forces were sent to the North to 'wipe out terrorism'. However, the army, in what is virtually 'alien' territory, have not been able to achieve this, while the Tamil militants have become increasingly bolder and more effective in their attacks. Frustrated by their failure and under pressure from the government, the Sri Lankan army has begun to act like an occupation army and has unleashed a reign of terror in the North and the East. Indiscriminate arrests, torture, retaliations against civilians, and destruction of

property, etc, on the part of the armed forces have been documented by local human rights groups as well as by Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ).

The government, in order to strengthen the hand of the police and the army, passed the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and later amended it to make the death penalty mandatory for a number of offences.

### 3 *Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)*

The law, initially introduced for a period of three years in 1979, was not allowed to lapse, but since 1982 has been made permanent. The ICJ commented on this as follows:

The fact that the PTA was made permanent ... indicates that the government intended to use the weapon of preventive detention permanently and not merely as a temporary measure in dealing with the minority problem. (ICJ report 1983)

Under this Act a person may be detained incommunicado for up to eighteen months, 'in such place and subject to such conditions as may be determined by the Minister' – the minister in question being not the Minister of Justice, but the Minister of Defence. The Act makes confessions made to the police admissible in court, even if retracted during the trial. The long period of detention incommunicado and the admissibility of confessions has opened the door wide for abuses of power, including torture. Several deaths while in custody have been reported.

The PTA of Sri Lanka has been compared to South Africa's Internal Security Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act of the United Kingdom. The ICJ report (*Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, ICJ Report 14, December 1981, pp. 43-50) points out that in its most obnoxious features the Sri Lankan PTA is closer to the South African Act. As a result of the PTA, the people in the North and East of Ceylon have been placed outside the rule of law and civilians have been exposed to a reign of state terror.

This grave situation has been aggravated by the promulgation of a Public Security Ordinance enabling senior police and army officers to bury dead bodies without any inquest or post mortem. This ordinance applies to any dead body, including those who have died in custody. According to the latest ICJ report (August 1983), twenty three members of the Tamil community have died while in custody. The disappearance of several others cannot be accounted for.

Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, Human Rights organisations, religious leaders and several political parties in Sri Lanka have condemned the PTA and demanded that it be repealed. Several of its provisions are in gross violation of the

international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Sri Lanka, under this government, became a signatory.

### **The violence of July 1983**

The civilised world followed with shocked disbelief the systematic attacks on the lives and property of innocent Tamil civilians throughout the Island, triggered off by the killing of thirteen Sinhala soldiers by Tamil militants.

The most shocking incident of savagery during this period was the massacre of fifty-three Tamil prisoners while under legal custody. The first massacre took place on Monday, 25 July, when thirty-five prisoners were killed. The government apparently took no precaution to prevent a repetition and two days later a further eighteen prisoners were killed. Only a few of these prisoners had been convicted of offences; charges were pending against a small number, but the majority had been detained under the notorious PTA, with no charges levelled against them at all. A magisterial inquiry was held into the deaths. But prison officials who testified claimed the killings were the result of 'a prison riot' and that they could not identify any of the persons responsible for the killings!

- Many civilians were killed during the violence. Whilst government sources estimated the number of deaths as between 300 to 400, unofficial sources say the number of deaths was as high as 2,000.
- Nearly 200,000 Tamils were made refugees.
- Over 5,000 properties belonging to Tamils were reduced to ashes.

The Sri Lankan government failed to give adequate protection or even assurance of protection to Tamils while they were being attacked. The President himself maintained an inexplicable silence during the first four days of violence. When he addressed the nation, he had no word of sympathy for the victims. His attitude to the Tamil people may have been indicated in what he stated to Ian Ward in an interview published in the London *Daily Telegraph* on 11 July 1983:

I have tried to be effective for some time but cannot. I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna people now ... Now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or of their opinion about us.

Here was a head of state repudiating his responsibility towards an entire section of his citizens. The President in his address to the nation announced a ban on the demand for a separate state and the constitution was amended, for the sixth time, to incorporate this ban. The demand that TULF leaders openly denounce separatism, as the ICJ report correctly points out, 'places the TULF leaders in an impossible situation politically. The likely result would be to leave the Tamils without any representation in Parliament and, in fact, disenfranchise the Tamil

people.' The TULF is at the moment no longer represented in parliament.

### 1 *Responsibility for the violence*

(a) *Indications:* Sri Lankan ambassadors, as well as propaganda material now disseminated abroad by the Ministry of State, generally take the line that the violence of July was due to extreme provocation of the Sinhala people by the terrorists, especially after the killing of thirteen Sinhala soldiers: that a spontaneous outburst of violence led to an uncontrollable breakdown of law and order. However, in the immediate aftermath of the violence, both President Jayewardene and Minister of State Anandatissa de Alwis stated in addresses to the nation that the violence was the result of a well-planned and systematic attack.

- Eyewitnesses, both local and foreign, have reported that the attacks were led by goon squads, and that these gangs were using prepared electoral lists to pinpoint and destroy Tamil homes, property and business establishments.
- Attacks continued after curfew was declared, with service personnel often taking part.

There seems to be overwhelming evidence that this attack was spearheaded by members of the ruling party itself and that several UNP members of parliament, as well as cabinet ministers were involved; that there is a caucus within the ruling party, led by the Minister of Industries and Scientific Affairs, Mr Cyril Mathew, and Buddhist monks, which is spearheading a militant anti-Tamil campaign. It has been reported by reputable newspapers and journals throughout the world that, under the chairmanship of Mr Cyril Mathew, a semi-official anti-Tamil campaign was being waged long before the violence of July; literature based on an extremely chauvinist Sinhala Buddhist ideology, enumerating Tamil privileges (ownership of property and business, representation in the professions and university, etc.), has been propagated through certain Sinhala institutions, as well as among certain sections of the armed forces.

During the debate on the sixth amendment to the constitution on 4 August 1983 (*Hansard*, Volume 24, no. 13), Mr Cyril Mathew made no secret about his views on the cause of the violence. He stated that he was not speaking as a cabinet minister but as a representative of the Sinhala people. Referring to the destruction of the Pettah shopping area of Colombo, which was a virtual Tamil monopoly, and to government plans to rebuild it, he said, 'The Sinhala people want to know what you are going to do? They [Tamils] are like maharajas there. A Sinhala trader cannot even get a finger in. It is this injustice which has been festering like a wound for twenty five years. Only a spark was needed. That spark fell on the 24th of July.'

In spite of appeals, even by Tamil members of the UNP cabinet, little has been done to restrain Mr Mathew, even after the tragedy of July. The Civil Rights Movement of Sri Lanka has urged the government (18 September 1983), in view of the constitutional ban on the promotion of separatism by word or deed, likewise to enact legislation to prevent the public utterance or publication of material likely to promote hatred against the Tamil minority. This would be in accordance with similar legislation obtaining in several western countries prohibiting racist propaganda and discrimination.

(b) *Government version*: On Monday, 1 August 1983, the government banned three marxist parties and ordered the arrest of several of their members, declaring that they had had a hand in the violence, as part of a four-phased plan to overthrow the government. On 22 August, President Jayewardene, in his second address to the nation after the violence, speaking as he said 'from the depth of my own conscience', repeated the allegation that leftist marxists were responsible.

## 2 *Expropriating the victims?*

Whilst the Tamil community was still reeling under the savage blows dealt to it in the last week of July, the Minister of State announced by government Gazette notification that 'all property affected by the riots shall be vested in the State.' The Minister then went on to explain the purpose of this law. A special authority (the Rehabilitation of Property and Industrial Authority — REPIA) would be set up, he said, which, in consultation with the Urban Development Authority (UDA), would engage in a massive reconstruction effort, according to a master plan to modernise the city of Colombo and other major towns. In the Sinhala version of his speech, the minister said that, once the government had spent so much of its resources for reconstruction, it would be 'unjust' simply to hand over such property to their previous owners. We shall decide, he further stated, to whom and in which manner these properties will be restored.

In one fell blow, it seemed that the victims of violence and arson had also been expropriated. Once again, there was a storm of protest, particularly from legal bodies, which stated that such a measure would be 'ultra vires' the constitution. The *Island* newspaper of Sunday, 14 August 1983, quoted one such legal opinion on its front page. 'A forcible vesture of this nature would be tantamount to violation of the freedom of a citizen to possess property, transact business and retain capital.' Government spokesmen thereupon hastened to add that the legislation was intended to prevent unjust speculation in property and protect victims from unscrupulous landlords. However, there are grave fears in Sri Lanka that this legislation will only crown what had been intended by Sinhala arsonists, namely to 'break the back of the Tamil economy'.



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— *Ethnic Violence in Sri Lanka, 1981-1983* (August 1983)

Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality, *Emergency '79* (1980)

*Additional information from*

Centre for Society and Religion, *Christian Worker*, Civil Rights Movement, *Lanka Guardian*, *Saturday Review*, Stichting Sri-Lanka Werkgroep, Tamil Information Centre, *Tamil Times*, and other Sri Lankan and overseas press.

## The Mathew Doctrine

*Cyril Mathew, Minister of Industries and Scientific Affairs, is one of the cabinet ministers alleged to have instigated the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983. For many years, Cyril Mathew has been making communalist speeches and publishing anti-Tamil tracts in Sinhala. Below we publish translated excerpts from some of his 'works'.*

*We are not concerned here to contest his 'facts' or opinions. But a reading of the other articles in this issue would show that his pronouncements are either factually wrong, intellectually dishonest or downright lies.*

### **Sinhalayage Adisi Hatura ('The Unseen enemy of the Sinhalese'), February 1970**

*From Chapter 1: The Indo-Ceylon (Implementations) Pact (passed by the UNP in 1967.)*

According to the Indo-Ceylon Pact, 300,000 Indians are to be given Sri Lankan citizenship, with all privileges, while it is expected that 525,000 Indians who await the granting of Indian citizenship will agree to return to India at some date in the future ... Alas what has this national government done?

Instead of taking steps to relieve the up-country villagers of the sufferings they have endured for untold years, it has instead granted a secure and well-planned political freedom to these 300,000 or so Tamils who are living on the plantations, in the centre of our country, who don't even speak Sinhalese but only know the Tamil language. By thus enjoying political rights, the foreign Indians will, in the future, become

the majority race and subdue the up-country Sinhalese.

The Indian trade unions always expect that the state will grant their members citizenship rights on humanitarian grounds.

In fact, the local population, the Sinhala peasants who are living in the up-country areas, deserve to enjoy these human rights more than do the Indians, who speak a strange language, observe strange religious and cultural practices and who were deposited in the central part of the country by the British without so much as a 'by your leave'. Not for any reason should they be allowed to take even one step that will permit them to trample on the Sinhala Buddhist culture of the up-country Sinhalese and strengthen their power in the up-country areas ...

The British imperialists protected the rights of the Indian people they brought into the country to work, through the laws of the country. Yet, I am sad to say that since independence, not one government has sought to enact legislation that ensured the right of the up-country village population to obtain work on the plantations. I repeat that the only consequence of implementing this dangerous Act (the Indo-Ceylon Pact) will be the guaranteeing of employment to the Indian population. In the meanwhile, the up-country Sinhalese peasant is engaged in a struggle to fight poverty, sickness and degradation which has come upon him due to his being jobless and landless.

By granting citizenship to 300,000 Indians, with all political rights, we add their number to that of those 134,187 who have already received citizenship under the Indo-Pakistan Citizenship Act. With this expansion of figures, the up-country Sinhalese who has been waging a life-and-death struggle for many years will be completely subjugated. Thus, not only will 450,000 Indians gain special rights to employment in the plantations, but they will also be entitled to purchase land, be given land under Land Settlement Schemes and obtain employment in the state and local government sectors. They will even take power in Village Councils and other local government bodies. Finally, after balancing off the power between the Sinhalese parties, they will become the determinants of our national politics. Thereby, the 'honour' of converting the up-country areas, which have for over 2,500 years been a Sinhalese kingdom, to an Indian state – or rather the 'honour' of making Sri Lanka a part of India will belong to the United National Party ...

*From Chapter 4: The four demands of the Federal Party\**

... If we genuinely come forward to keep the up-country Sinhalese

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\* The Federal Party broke away from the Tamil Congress in 1949 over the disfranchisement of the plantation workers. Their four demands were for a federal constitution, equal status for the Tamil language with Sinhala, a repeal of the citizenship laws and an end to land colonisation.

from becoming a minority and to protect their rights against the Indian voters, we must know that whether Indians' names are entered on electoral lists in an illegal manner by certain corrupt officials, or whether some bankrupt politician seeks the help of the Indian voters to keep a government that is losing its stability, in power, the results will be the same. Either way, the local Sinhalese will be totally submerged by the large number of Indians who have been registered on the voters' lists and be reduced to the status of a minority community ...

The Federalists, who say that Tamil-speaking government servants, professionals, traders, land-owners, house-owners, petty vendors and small-scale shop-keepers (cigar sellers) should be permitted to live in the traditionally Sinhalese areas where they now live and work, and who say that these people should continue to enjoy all privileges, also say that citizenship of Sri Lanka should be conferred upon the migrant Indians who are not resident in the plantation areas. At the same time, and with as much emphasis, they ask that not one Sinhalese be permitted to settle down in the farm schemes being established in the northern and eastern regions.

Even a child can see that through their far-seeing plan of action, they not only want to establish the north and east parts of the country as being solely populated by Tamil-speaking peoples, but also want to ensure the strengthening of their rights in the other seven provinces and increase the numbers of the Tamil-speaking population in those areas by obtaining citizenship for all Indians ...

According to the facts outlined above, the only solution to the problem which is now being faced by the Sinhalese people is that of uniting under the banner of Sinhala Buddhist culture and supporting whichever of the two parties (the UNP or the SLFP) which will openly and sincerely oppose the anti-Sinhala demands of the Federalists and the Indians ...

*From Chapter 6: First things first – the up-countrymen before the Indian*

Neither the Sirima-Shastri Pact of the SLFP or the Indo-Ceylon (Implementation) Pact of the UNP will be helpful in relieving the up-country villager from the economic crisis which he is now facing.

A fact that should be especially mentioned here is that the wholesale and retail trade, which about sixty-eight years ago was in the hands of the Sinhalese in Colombo as well as in the Uva, Sabaragamuwa and Central regions, is now completely in the hands of Indian nationals. This has not happened spontaneously, but is the result of an organised move by Indian trade unions and other organisations to supply Indians with cash and other necessities to purchase Sinhalese-owned business enterprises and buildings. Because of this far-seeing and organised plan of the Indians, the number of Sinhalese traders has been reduced

by about 90 per cent – and these have been replaced by a similar number of Tamil traders ...

The precarious situation in which the Sinhalese now find themselves is of their own doing. By their actions, they have divided themselves between the SLFP and the UNP, and pushed these parties to seek the help of the Indians. We have forgotten the lessons that history has taught us. It is because Sinhalese rulers sought assistance from Indians, in order to overcome their foes, in the eighth century, that Tamil power in Sri Lanka grew to such a point. We have forgotten the fate of the kingdom of Kotte, which, because it sought the help of the Portuguese to defend itself against rival princes, finally saw Sinhalese rulers replaced by Portuguese rulers. What happened to the up-country kingdom was also that a foreign ruler came to power because of our internal disunity ...

The Sinhalese can only be saved through their own efforts and not by anything or anybody else. We should comprehend the obvious fact that when your unity is divided, it is the third party, the outsider, who will benefit. Taking into consideration the events of the past, we should be wise enough to discern what will happen in the future, instead of merely arguing that this party or that leader will defend the democratic right of having the country ruled according to the wishes of the majority of its people. Both parties should be compelled to confront this challenge. In both parties there are those who care not only about the Sinhalese language but also about the Sinhalese race. Those who have patriotic feelings in both the parties should unite under some leadership.

In the attempt to bring about unity based on the just and fair right of the Sinhalese to work for a prosperous future for their country, we should not be deterred by any personal beliefs or ideas of our leaders.

As a first step, in the not-so-distant future, the Federalists of the North and East will unite with the Indians in the Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa Provinces to establish a Tamil state.

The final step will be that all the Tamil-speaking people living in Sri Lanka will unite with the Tamil-speaking people of Madras and subjugate the Sinhalese people.

Therefore, before the elections of 1970, let us unite as Sinhalese in one party, because this is the one thing to prevent us from being dominated by the Indians economically and politically ...

#### *From Chapter 7: Tamils reign supreme*

The economic threat posed to the up-country Sinhalese people by the foreign Indians, whether it be in the field of trade or in the field of employment, is at a very grave stage.

Today, the number of Sinhalese who have received jobs on the plantations is very few. The Indian trade unions have embarked on a very shrewd plan of action to deprive the up-country Sinhalese of even these

few jobs ...

In the central market in Colombo, which is at Pettah, the local Sinhalese traders today do not own even 5 per cent of the trade. The power is almost entirely in the hands of Indians, Borahs and Sindhs.

The export-import trade is completely in the hands of foreigners. A person who travels from Colombo Fort to Wellawatte could see how many Sindhi shops there are on either side of the Galle Road. Every single one of these trading establishments was started after an independent government was set up in Sri Lanka in 1948. From that day to this, these foreigners donate large sums of money to the parties in power and obtain honorary citizenship or temporary residence permits so that they may carry on with their business. These traders are in the habit of giving financial assistance to all parties, left or right, and they achieve their ends by making huge gifts of money to the party that is in power as well as to the leaders of the party ...

*From Chapter 10: The future of the Sinhalese*

As Sinhalese who wish for peace and development, whether we be Buddhists or of any other religion, let us pray that no massacre of the type that took place in Malaysia on 13 May 1969 in a racial riot will ever take place here.

Any person who reads this book with care will realise that there is a systematic growth of Tamil forces in this country, in opposition to the Sinhala Buddhist culture and the political and economic background of Sri Lanka. As matters now stand, it would be useless to merely say 'Let there be peace'. If there is to be peace, all of us Sinhalese should set out on a firm plan of action to ensure the growth and development of future generations of Sinhalese in security and to ensure the defence of our rights and aspirations against foreign powers.

The primary obligation of any government in this country is to defend the rights of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority ...

Even though Prime Minister Bandaranaike, and former Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake were so intimidated by the Tamil parties that they were prepared to grant them a Tamil state, under the pretext of setting up district councils or regional councils, the Sinhalese forces that rose up in protest were so strong that one was forced to tear up the agreement, while the other had to rescind the legislation.

At the annual sessions of the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam which was held in Jaffna, at the town hall, the general-secretary of the organisation said in his closing speech that the organisation 'We Tamils' is prepared to die in the defence of their rights. They would begin guerrilla war. It is necessary for us to commence a guerrilla war in order to win our rights ...

Oh you Sinhalese, who are full of patriotism and nationalism, we pray that, just as the disaster you are preparing to leave for the future

generations of Sinhalese, by permitting the governments that you have set up in your name to betray Sinhalese rights, one by one, thereby strengthening Tamil power, is very clearly visible to us, it will become as visible to you also. We pray that your political blindness will vanish, and that you may see the truth!

*Let us unite as Sinhalese to repress the threats of the Tamils!*

**Text of letter sent to the High Priests of the three Nickayas**

20 June 1979

Honoured and Venerable Sirs,

Having heard that there are plans to hold a large gathering of monks in Colombo, including the chief incumbent monks of all three nickayas and all other dignitaries of the Buddhist faith, and having considered the reports in the newspapers regarding the matters you hope to discuss at this gathering, with patriotism and religious fervour, I respectfully subject for your attention, the following facts.

While I offer my salutations to the priesthood that has, on every occasion when a threat to the existence and development of the Buddhist faith, the Sinhala race and the country of Sri Lanka was raised throughout our history of thousands of years, come forward, even at the cost of their lives, I crave permission to show that if you re-order the aims of the massive gathering of monks that you hope to hold in Colombo in the near future, and if you build up mass opinion on that basis, you would be fulfilling a heavy responsibility that has fallen on the shoulders of the great sangha at this time.

1 To wholly condemn all proposals, propoganda and attempts to divide the country, made by no matter what person, and to show that laws should be enacted which will make such actions treasonable ones and ones liable for punishment.

2 To point out that ruins, which for thousands of years have been swallowed up by jungle in the north and east regions of this country, must be protected against the destructive acts of the Tamil people and to show that the defence and reconstruction of these ancient ruins, which are the reposititories of our race and of our culture, is the duty and obligation of this righteous government.

3 Today, we are even confronting difficulties in proving that some of the areas so destroyed by Tamil people are sites of ancient Buddhist shrines. To prove that the site of the historic Sri Wardhana bo tree, which is said to have been planted by King Kavantissa close to the Seruwila Sangha Maha Vihara and which was, until completely burnt to ashes in 1976, growing in a place which is now known by the Tamil name of Kiliveddi, we have only a report of an income tax officer who served in the area in the 1950s, where he says that there were several

short stone pillars in the site and that the bo tree was reputed to be an ancient one. The bo tree of the Gokanna temple in Trincomalee also met with the same fate. The destruction of ruins of Buddhist shrines in many places in the Eastern Province and the building of farms, cattle sheds and private houses on these sites, the incident regarding the defaced stone inscription which was recently discovered by the Archaeological Department in Kuchchaevli, in Trincomalee, the discovery that a *stupa*, which was in a site of Buddhist ruins at a place called Sembumalai, had been dug up and a large Buddha statue which was also on that site until quite recently had disappeared, the erecting of a modern building on that site – all these will serve to emphasise the gravity of the situation. Therefore it is necessary to show the urgent need to declare all sites of Buddhist ruins found up to now and to be found in the future as protected archaeological reserves by a special gazette notification, and then record their situation in archaeological maps, after surveying the area and marking its boundaries, so that these sites could not be damaged thereafter.

4 To stress the need to plant 'bo' saplings from the Sri Maha Bodhi at Seruwila, where the Sriwardhana bo tree was sited, and at other such sites where sacred bo trees have been destroyed.

5 From the time that such a place is declared to be an archaeological preserve, if any Buddhist monk comes forward to protect that site, there should be no obstacles placed in his way.

6 Where a Buddhist monk comes forward voluntarily to protect and reconstruct such ruined temples and shrines, his residence in that place should be legitimised and full patronage given to build Buddhist settlements in the surrounding area so that his needs and wants are looked after. Your gathering should show that such acts are essential for the long-standing stability of the Sinhala race and of the Buddhist faith.

7 Advise the monkhood to come forward without delay to protect and develop the ruined shrines and temples which have been declared archaeological preserves by the Archaeological Department, immediately halting their setting up of residences in congested areas close to the city which are unsuited for the priestly way of life at a time like this, when we need an island-wide plan of action to protect our ancient places of worship from those traitors who are engaged in a cruel, organised campaign to fight against the growth and stability of the Buddhist faith and thereby destroy the Sinhala race to extinction.

If the sangha would take heed of the proposals I have laid out above, I worshipfully submit to you that you would have truly come forward to face the present situation.

In obedience,

C. Cyril Mathew, President, Federation of Buddhist Societies of State

Corporations

101, Barnes Place, Colombo 7

**From parliamentary debates in 1980**

Deputy Speaker, this Act for a Central Cultural Fund is one which should receive the support of all sections of this House. I would particularly like to stress the section of this Act which speaks of reconstructing buildings and protecting them. We all know that, in every civilised country, the civilisation has grown by basing itself on the cultural values and the religious ideology of the majority population of those countries ... Sri Lanka is known as Sinhale. It is a Buddhist country. Nobody can deny this fact. No rulers can forget this fact. If they do, I do not think such a ruler will last for more than twenty-four hours. Sri Lanka has been promised to the Sinhalese as a Buddhist country by the Kandyan Treaty.

It is in this context that we should consider the Act which is before us. Nobody can say that even one drop of blood has been shed in the cause of Buddhism. Buddhism is most often a religion which is tolerant of other beliefs. Its followers (Buddhists) have always accepted that every person had a right to observe any religion he or she chose. When the Dutch chased after Roman Catholics in order to destroy them, the Sinhalese kings gave them shelter. In the same way, when a Buddhist shrine is built, one can often see that a section is set apart for the placing of Hindu deities. This is the background to what I hope to present here. Unfortunately, in the recent past, no matter what my friends of the opposition may say, due to their espousal of the policy for Eelam, there has been born a strange and dastardly movement which has very definitely been organised by a group through the political forces in those areas, to totally efface and destroy all signs of Buddhist civilisation and culture from the northern and eastern regions of the island ... This policy is being followed because of – very definitely because of – the political ideology espoused by the Tamil United Liberation Front. I have got to know of several occasions on which shrines in ancient places of Buddhist worship have been deliberately destroyed ...

28 October 1980, *Hansard*, cols 1975-80

It is barbarians who destroy places of worship. Hon. Speaker, if anyone decided to destroy Buddhist places of worship in the North and in the East, we call them barbarians, savages. They are trying to destroy Buddhist shrines in these areas so as to prove that there was no Sinhala culture there. This is the actual plan of the TULF. This is their organised plan of action. They want to show that there never was a Sinhala Buddhist culture in the northern and eastern areas. They are trying to destroy all signs, all ruins, shrines and temples. This is the



charge I make against them in this House. I say that all those who do such things are barbarians. They are savages and barbarians.

18 November 1980, Hansard, cols 1447

**Sihaluni, Budu Savana Bera Ganiw! ('Sinhalese, Safeguard the Buddhist Order!'), published in 1981 by the Seruwila Sacred City Development Committee.**

*From Chapter 3: 'Shall we allow our national, religious and cultural heritage to be destroyed?'*

The origins of Sinhala culture are not to be found in the recent past, but many thousands of years ago. At the time when the *arhat* Mahinda brought the message of Buddhism to this country at the behest of the great Emperor, Dharmashoka, which was during the reign of King Devanam Piyatissa, the Sinhalese had already attained a very high level of civilisation.

With the establishment of Buddhism, the Sinhala culture and civilisation took on a new orientation. The life of the Sinhalese began to be guided by Buddhism. Their every creation – every work – was full of the influences of Buddhism. Villages and temples, homes and palaces, all were refined by the spirit of the Buddhist teachings. From the North to the South and from the West to the East, the entire length and breath of the Tri-Sinhala kingdom had only one culture; that was, the Sinhala Buddhist culture.

The Lord Buddha visited Sri Lanka on three occasions. On those occasions, he visited several places in the northern and eastern areas. In the fifth year after the attainment of Buddhahood, He visited Sri Lanka for the second time and travelled to Naga Deepa. Several places which have been cleansed and sanctified by His visits are to be found in the North and in the East, such as Deegavaapiya and Seruwila.

Since the coming of the Aryans, not only did they establish settlements in the areas known today as the North and East, but they built irrigation works, that astonish the world even today, so as to make that area fertile. After the coming of Mahinda, Buddhism began to spread rapidly in these areas, just as it did in other parts of the island. Today, in the Northern and Eastern provinces, one can find the ruins of thousands of Buddhist temples and shrines erected by Buddhist rulers and devotees during this time ...

These ruins of our Sinhala Buddhist culture which have a history thousands of years old are scattered throughout the entire Tri-Sinhala land and cry out to the world of the glory and majesty of our – yours and mine – ancient civilisation, our history, our past.

Yet, from a few years ago, there has been an organised movement of anti-Sinhala, anti-Buddhist barbarians to destroy our invaluable

archaeological ruins and Buddhist shrines. The evidence given before the Sansoni Commission by the Deputy Commissioner of Archaeology, Mr M.H. Sirisoma, is very clear regarding the great national and religious treasures that one can find in the Districts of Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mulativu, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai, which are today known to us as the North and East Provinces, as well as regarding the organised anti-Sinhala Buddhist campaign which is being waged to destroy these ruins and shrines.

Therefore, as Sinhalese, it is our bounden duty to protect these national and religious treasures for our future generations. This is an appeal from the Seruwila Sacred City Development Committee to you, in order to draw your attention to this situation ...

While, up to now, there has been no obstacle or threat posed to any person of a minority nationality, be he Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay, or to any person of a minority religion, be he Catholic, Christian, Hindu or Muslim, to live in the capital of modern Sri Lanka, Colombo, or in any other part of the country by the Sinhala-Buddhist people, it is also a fact that such obstacles or threats will not be posed to these people in the future as well. In the capital city of Colombo alone, there are over a hundred Hindu *kovils*, mosques and Catholic and Christian churches. Not only have these places of worship never been harmed by Buddhists, but, as a matter of fact, Buddhists themselves venerate such places. Yet to the majority population of the country, that is to its Sinhala Buddhists, the protection of ancient Buddhist shrines and ruins and the very act of living in the northern and eastern parts of the country, where their fore-fathers established settlements many centuries ago and where they built places of worship for Buddhists from time immemorial, has become a very grave question today ...

How shall we keep our eyes shut, thinking only of ourselves and not of our right to live in the districts of Mulativu, Vavuniya, Mannar and Jaffna, which belong to the ancient Raja Rata, and in the districts of Trincomalee, Amparai, Batticaloa, which belong to the ancient state of Rohana, and of our right to protect and worship at the ancient Buddhist shrines in these areas? It is indubitable that the future generations, as well as our fore-fathers who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of their race and for the glory of their religion, shall curse us for our silence. At least now, in the name of our race, in the name of our fore-fathers and in the name of the unborn generations, let us all direct our attention to this situation.

If you have a brain,  
and yet do not think of these matters,  
Have your eyes been blinded,  
you Sinhalese!

(from a poem by well-known Buddhist monk  
and patriotic poet, Ven S Mahinda.)

# Sri Lanka: myths and realities

*This report was prepared by the Committee for Rational Development which was formed during the aftermath of the July 1983 violence. Its members include Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers of different political persuasions. The objective of the Committee is to assist in the finding of solutions to contemporary social problems of Sri Lanka on the basis of strengthening democratic institutions and the rational process in society.*

Semi-truths tear at the fragile fabric of a united Sri Lanka. In this report we shall try to examine some key areas that have become a focus of ethnic resentments and hostilities. We shall take up certain widely prevalent myths and contrast them with the realities, which we have endeavoured to discern without prejudice or partiality.

There are two possible ways of looking at how the various ethnic communities have fared in various fields of national life. One is by taking the population figures of each community and measuring them against their share of jobs, university places and other indexes of social attainment. This method is the one that has most often been used in recent discussion of the subject – sometimes selectively or inaccurately. There is another method that is relevant in certain contexts. This is to take the geographical areas where particular ethnic communities are concentrated and to compare the levels of social attainment in these areas with others. We shall use both these methods of analysis.

## *Population*

According to the Census completed in 1981, the total population of Sri Lanka was estimated to be 14.85 million. The percentage of each ethnic community was as follows: Sinhalese 74%, Tamils 18.2% (Sri Lankan Tamil 12.6%, Indian Tamil 5.6%), Muslims 7.4%, and others 0.4%. While the Tamils – Sri Lankan and Indian – are around 18% of the national population, they are 92% of the population in the Northern Province and 68% in the Eastern Province (see the ethnic breakdown, North and East, in Table 1). For a correct understanding of our ethnic problems, both these sets of figures must be borne in mind. Ethnic groups diffused uniformly throughout the island do not develop the same consciousness, and do not face the same problems, as those which are highly concentrated in certain areas. Governmental policies must also cope with this reality.

## *Geographical zones*

We have adopted the Central Bank's division of the country into five regional zones.

Table 1: Ethnic breakdown – North and East

	Total	- Sinhalese	Tamils	Moors	Indians	Others
<i>North</i>						
Jaffna	831,112	4,615	792,246	13,757	20,001	493
Mannar	106,940	8,710	54,106	28,464	14,072	1,558
Vavuniya	95,904	15,876	54,541	6,640	18,592	255
Mullaitivu	77,512	3,948	58,904	3,777	10,766	117
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,111,468</i>	<i>33,149</i>	<i>959,797</i>	<i>52,638</i>	<i>63,431</i>	<i>2,453</i>
		<i>2.98%</i>	<i>86.35%</i>	<i>4.73%</i>	<i>5.71%</i>	<i>.23%</i>
<i>East</i>						
Batticaloa	330,899	10,646	234,348	79,317	3,868	2,720
Amparai	388,786	146,371	78,315	161,481	1,410	1,209
Trincomalee	256,790	86,341	86,743	74,403	6,767	2,536
<i>Total</i>	<i>976,475</i>	<i>243,358</i>	<i>399,406</i>	<i>315,201</i>	<i>12,045</i>	<i>6,465</i>
		<i>24.92%</i>	<i>40.90%</i>	<i>32.28%</i>	<i>1.24%</i>	<i>.66%</i>
<i>Overall total</i>	<i>2,087,943</i>	<i>276,507</i>	<i>1,359,203</i>	<i>367,839</i>	<i>75,476</i>	<i>8,918</i>
		<i>13.24%</i>	<i>65.10%</i>	<i>17.62%</i>	<i>3.61%</i>	<i>.43%</i>

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 1981

*Zone I:* Colombo District (excluding the Colombo Municipality) Gampaha, Kalutara, Galle and Matara districts. Wet zone, predominantly Sinhala areas.

*Zone II:* Hambantota, Moneragala, Amparai, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Puttalam districts. Dry zone, predominantly Sinhala areas.

*Zone III:* Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts. Dry zone, predominantly Sri Lankan Tamil areas.

*Zone IV:* Kandy, Matale, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla Ratnapura, Kegalle and Kurunegala districts. Predominantly Sinhala, with a concentration of Indian Tamils in the hill country.

### *Employment in the state sector*

*Q:* Why is there a popular impression that Tamils have an unduly high share of public sector jobs?

*A:* The impression has been created by taking figures in selected government departments, or in selected fields like accountancy and engineering. For instance, it has been claimed that in these fields the figures are around 22% and 42% respectively. 'In 1977, 22.6% recruited to the Accountants' Service, 42.3% recruited to the Engineers' Service, 21.6% recruited to the Shroffs' Service were Tamils. In 1978, 56.5% recruited to the Engineers' Service were Tamils, while only 39.9% were Sinhalese' – (*This is the Truth*). \*

*Q:* Do Tamils in fact have a disproportionate share of jobs in the public sector?

*A:* No, the latest published figures – for 1980 – give the following picture (see Tables 2 and 3).

*Table 2: state sector (excluding corporation sector)*

<i>Category</i>	<i>percentages of Sinhalese</i>	<i>Tamils</i>	<i>Others</i>
Professional & technical	82%	12%	6%
Administrative & managerial	81%	16%	3%
All categories	84%	12%	4%

*Q:* How do the percentages in Tables 2 and 3 compare with the ethnic breakdown of population?

\*Editor's note: *This is the Truth* was published in late 1983 by the Information Department of the Sri Lankan government.

*Table 3: Public sector (state and corporation sectors combined)*

<i>Category percentages of</i>	<i>Sinhalese</i>	<i>Tamils</i>	<i>Others</i>
Professional & technical	82%	13%	5%
Administrative & managerial	83%	14%	3%
All categories	85%	11%	4%

*Source:* Census of Public and Corporation Sector Employment, 1980 (Department of Census and Statistics and Ministry of Plan Implementation).

*A:* Compare them with the population figures. With 74% of the population, the Sinhalese have 85% of all the jobs in the public sector, 82% in the professional and technical categories, and 83% in the administrative and managerial categories.

On the other hand, the Tamils, with 18% of the population, have only 11% of all public sector jobs, 13% of professional and technical posts, and 14% of administrative and managerial positions. Confirmation of this position is to be found in the UNP election manifesto of 1977. That manifesto said: 'The United National Party accepts the position that there are numerous problems confronting the Tamil-speaking people. The lack of solution to their problems has made the Tamil-speaking people support even a movement for the creation of a separate state.' It went on to say: 'The Party, when it comes to power, will take all possible steps to remedy their grievances in such fields as ...' and it then listed four such fields, of which the fourth was 'employment in the public and semi-public corporations'.

So, in 1977 the present governing party felt that those who had a genuine grievance regarding public sector employment were the Tamils.

*Q:* Would this position be changed by an ethnic quota for public sector employment, as some people have suggested?

*A:* It could, but since an ethnic quota would have to be applied throughout the public sector, it would mean that the Sinhalese presence in certain sectors would be reduced from its present levels. A few Sinhalese professionals would gain jobs as doctors, professionals or engineers, but a large number of poorer Sinhalese in government departments, corporations or the armed forces which are overwhelmingly Sinhalese would have to lose their jobs to Tamils.

#### *General employment*

*Q:* How do the ethnic communities stand in relation to employment in general?

*A:* Table 4 gives the relevant statistics.

*Q:* What do these figures show?

Table 4: Employment by community, all island

	Percent of labour force in the community			As a percent of the total population in the community			
	Self- employed	Employer	Unpaid family worker	Employer	Employee	Unpaid family worker	
Kandyan Sinhalese	24.62	1.07	20.33	0.43	15.96	8.09	34.27
Low Country Sinhalese	18.80	1.57	8.97	0.59	19.52	3.35	30.49
Sri Lankan Tamils	27.52	0.95	8.96	0.30	16.23	2.81	27.97
Indian Tamils	1.80	0.17	0.87	0.08	47.50	0.45	48.96
Moors	25.16	2.58	7.87	0.70	13.64	2.12	23.25
Malays	9.72	1.39	4.17	0.45	20.63	1.35	25.23
Burghers	3.23	0.00	0.00	0.00	25.61	0.00	26.87
Others	33.33	0.00	0.00	10.00	20.00	0.00	30.00
Total	19.59	1.24	11.49	0.47	20.13	4.37	32.42

Source: Report on Consumer Finance and Socio-Economic Survey 1978/1979, p. 72, Table 56.

A: Tamils have a higher proportion of their labour force employed (94.38% of Indian Tamils and 89.21% of Sri Lankan Tamils) than Sinhalese (84.14% of Kandyan Sinhalese and 81.51% of low country Sinhalese). On the other hand, the Kandyan Sinhalese (34.27%) and the low country Sinhalese (30.49%) have a larger proportion of the total population in their communities in employment than Sri Lankan Tamils (27.97%), while the Indian Tamils have a still higher proportion (48.96%).

Q: What do these last mentioned facts mean?

A: The figures for Indian Tamils are explained by the fact that whole families are employed on the estates, and at the wage levels at which they are employed, the entire family earnings go into their subsistence. On the other hand, in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils, it is evident that the few who do earn have a greater number of individuals to support.

Q: What is the unemployment rate for each community?

A: Official figures for 1979 give the following unemployment rates (as a percentage of the labour force): Kandyan Sinhalese 13.9%, low country Sinhalese 18.5%, Sri Lankan Tamil 10.9%, Indian Tamil 5.6%; the overall average was 14.8%.

Q: If the Tamils have a low rate of unemployment why are the youth so dissatisfied?

A: Though the Tamils have a low unemployment rate on average, the Labour Force and Socio-Economic Survey published by the Ministry of Plan Implementation and the Department of Census and Statistics, 1983, shows that the unemployment rate among young Tamil males who have passed GCE A/L qualification is 41%, while their Sinhalese counterparts suffer an unemployment rate of 29%. This may help us to understand the phenomenon of the militant youth movement in the North.

Q: If Tamils are under-represented in public sector employment, why is their unemployment rate lower?

A: This would indicate that Tamils have moved away from employment in the public sector and have had more success in finding employment in the private sector. However, a good deal of this is self-employment, as Table 4 shows (27.52% of the labour force in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils is self-employed). Both Jaffna Tamils and Kandyan Sinhalese, traditionally engaged in agriculture, have a relatively lower rate of unemployment.

Q: Can a system of ethnic quotas work in relation to employment outside the public sector?

A: Apart from the fact that it would mean again that large numbers of



Sinhalese would lose their jobs to Tamils in those sectors where they are overwhelmingly dominant at present (e.g. the Free Trade Zone projects), an ethnic quota would be extremely difficult to enforce in a free economy such as that created under the present government.

Further, it has been pointed out that many Tamils, because of the language and other barriers to employment in the public sector, are finding self-employment or setting up their own enterprises. Government interference in these sectors would not only be very difficult, but would also be immoral. It would also create further bottlenecks in a nationwide situation of frustrated aspirations.

### *Income levels*

*Q:* What is the position of the different ethnic communities in respect of income levels?

*A:* It is possible to arrive at an approximate answer by taking the income figures in respect of the different geographical zones listed earlier. Table 5 gives the figures.

*Q:* What do these figures show?

*A:* The Colombo Municipality has the highest average income level and the predominantly Tamil areas (Zone III) come next. But averages can be misleading.

*Q:* Why?

*A:* The high incomes earned by a small percentage of Tamils who have university degrees skew the figures. This is evident if one looks at the average incomes for people with O/L and A/L qualifications. Here Zone III ranks fourth, in both cases.

*Table 5: Income by zone and education*

<i>Zone</i>	<i>Without univ. degrees (OL) Rs.</i>	<i>Average income Rs.</i>	<i>Without univ. degrees (AL) Rs.</i>
I	974.62	631	925
II	909.25	713	768
III	888.11	746	903
IV	770.71	512	987
V	1743.20	1137	4986

*Source:* Report on Consumer Finance and Socio-Economic Survey, 1978/1979, p. 115, Table 99

*Education*

*Q:* That last answer leads one to the subject of education, which has been one of the storm-centres of interethnic controversy. Is it true that Tamils gain admission to the universities far in excess of their proportion of the population?

*A:* This is not really true. If we look at the total number of admissions, in the last three years, Sinhalese have averaged around 75%. Let us look at the admission figures in the last three years (see Table 6).

*Q:* What do they show?

*A:* Tamil admissions to university have not been over ten percentage points of their ethnic proportion in the population. Popular perception about Tamil students in the coveted faculties of medicine, law and engineering usually place their participation at 50%.

*Table 6: University admission figures*

	1981			1982			1983		
	S	T %	O	S	T %	O	S	T %	O
Arts	82.8	13.3	3.9	79.4	16.3	4.3	77.1	16.4	6.6
Physical Science	63.5	31.8	4.7	61.1	33.5	5.5	73.4	23.1	3.6
Biological									
Science	72.5	24.3	3.2	71.7	26.1	2.2	70.3	23.1	3.6
Engineering	67.2	28.1	4.7	66.9	28.5	4.5	66.4	28.1	5.5
Medicine	72.7	23.1	4.3	72.4	25.3	2.3	72.8	22.1	5.1
Law	73.0	16.2	10.0	68.8	24.0	7.3	78.5	11.5	10.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>76.4</i>	<i>19.2</i>	<i>4.4</i>	<i>74.3</i>	<i>22.0</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>75.0</i>	<i>19.3</i>	<i>5.7</i>

*Source:* As released by Division of Planning and Research University Grant Commission, 1983

*Note:* due to rounding of figures, the percentages do not always add up to 100.

Secondly, what is also interesting is that, except for engineering, the representation of Sinhalese is near their ethnic proportion in the population. Thirdly, whatever the faculty, Sinhalese participation is always over 60%.

*Q:* *This is the Truth* and other publications show different figures with a greater concentration of Tamils in medicine and law?

*A:* Those figures are based on the present composition of the student body. In the years 1968 and 1969, before the District quota was imposed, there was a larger Tamil intake to these faculties. However, these two years have not been representative since the year 1974.

*Q:* Why, then, is there a popular impression among Sinhalese that Tamils are privileged in respect of university admissions?

A: Because in certain coveted university faculties such as medicine, engineering and the physical sciences, there are more Tamils in relation to their proportions in the population.

Q: Aren't these the faculties which matter most?

A: Yes and no. They are the faculties which matter most to the elite groups competing in the fields which are most privileged in respect of status and material rewards. But while this is certainly an important part of social reality, we must also remember what a small part of the nation is engaged in this race. For a complete picture of opportunities and attainments in education in respect of different ethnic communities, we must look not only at the whole range of university education, but also at the totality of education, since university students are themselves only the narrow apex of a broad pyramid. For many people, what happens lower down makes a greater impact on their lives than what happens at the top.

Q: But why should Tamil students fare better in the competition to get into certain faculties?

A: In the past, historical reasons and the development of educational systems led Tamils to concentrate on certain fields of attainment. At present, however, this gap is closing, due to concentrated efforts to increase standards in Sinhala areas.

Q: How can the consequent imbalances be remedied?

A: By decentralisation of higher education and the strengthening of regional centres of learning. This would maximise opportunities by enabling regional institutions to cope with the demand for education from a particular region without creating national disgruntlement and a communal sense of grievance.

Q: What about ethnic quotas in this field?

A: Any such solution would have to be approached very warily in the light of the fact that media-wise standardisation\* between 1970 and 1977 was one of the principal causes of frustration among educated Tamil youth which fuelled anti-state violence and the separatist movement.

Q: What about the allegation that Tamil examiners have cheated?

A: When the allegations were first made, a commission of university dons looked into them, in 1970, and resolved that wide-scale cheating was not a possibility and that these allegations were therefore

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\* *Editors' Note:* The 1970 SLFP government introduced a method of adjusting examination marks between the two language media so that those sitting exams in the Sinhala medium needed fewer marks to get into university than those sitting in the Tamil medium.

misconceived. In 1979, when the Minister for Industrial and Scientific Affairs put forward further allegations, dons at the University of Colombo (both Sinhala and Tamil) demanded a public commission of inquiry into the matter so as to establish the facts in an objective manner. In the absence of such an inquiry, it is impossible to say whether there have, in fact, been any cases of false marking, in either medium. On the other hand, the slur cast on Tamil examiners as a body, accusing them of cheating, has done great damage to relations between the two ethnic groups. The 1975 Report of the Sectoral Committee, chaired by Pieter Keuneman, a minister in the government which first introduced the policy of media-wise standardisation, said that 'Organised manipulation of marks in one whole medium in a deceptive manner is neither possible nor probable, and while the possibilities of correcting examiner variability through standardisation was slight, its contribution both to deepening and indeed institutionalising suspicion between communities and promoting distrust in the fairness or impartiality of public examinations' was considerable.

*Q:* The point was made earlier that the educational opportunities available to and the levels of educational attainment of each ethnic community cannot be judged purely on the basis of figures of university students. What is the total picture?

*A:* First, it must be realised that less than 1 per cent of all students get into the universities. To judge a community's educational levels by this minority alone is to ignore the needs and aspirations of the other 99 per cent. In fact, the majority of Jaffna Tamils, like their Sinhala counterparts, have only secondary schooling, and 21.60 per cent have no schooling at all. Table 7 gives the figures.

There is a further important fact that emerges from Table 7 – that aggregating educational statistics for Tamils is grossly unfair to the Indian Tamil community, which is the most underprivileged in respect of education. This, in spite of the fact that the labour of Indian Tamil estate workers produces a great part of the wealth on which we all live. Consider in Table 7 the illiteracy figures for estate populations (43.58%) and the zero figures of A/L qualified undergraduates, and degreed persons. All the agitation against an 'excess' of Tamil students in particular faculties never refers to this fact. Nobody who ever asks for ethnic quotas in education thinks this principle should apply to Indian Tamils.

*Q:* Is it possible to measure in some way the general level of educational attainment among each ethnic community?

*A:* This is done through the Index of Education attainment. The figures for 1978/9 show that it is the low country Sinhalese who have a better educational level (5.26) than the Sri Lankan Tamils (4.94),

Table 7: Percentage of population classified according to educational status and by sectors and zones, 1978/79

Educational status	Urban	Rural	Estate	Zone I	Zone II	Zone III	Zone IV	Zone V	All island
No schooling (illiterate)	18.57	22.47	43.58	19.47	25.38	21.60	27.10	19.08	23.40
No schooling (literate)	1.09	0.92	1.08	0.67	0.70	2.92	0.83	1.25	0.97
Primary	33.89	39.55	47.39	36.70	42.36	37.22	40.94	32.41	38.92
Secondary	31.80	27.12	6.67	31.04	23.72	25.81	22.81	31.76	26.43
Passed SSC/GCE (OL)	12.38	8.60	1.28	10.23	6.58	11.53	7.24	13.11	8.64
Passed HSC/GCE (AL)	1.35	0.84	0.0	1.19	0.64	0.79	0.66	1.36	0.88
Undergraduate	0.18	0.14	0.0	0.21	0.12	0.05	0.10	0.16	0.14
Passed degree	0.60	0.29	0.0	0.36	0.42	0.18	0.30	0.65	0.34
Other	0.14	0.07	0.0	0.13	0.08	0.10	0.02	0.02	0.08
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Report on Consumer Finance and Socio-Economic Survey 1978/79, p. 28, Table 15

Note: Zone I and Zone V have better literacy figures.

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and that the Indian Tamils rank lowest in the scale (2.10). The figures for other groups are Kandyan Sinhalese 4.40, Moors 3.91, Malays 5.48, Burghers 6.44, others 6.50. (*Source: Report on Consumer Finance and Socio-Economic Survey, 1978/79*)

### *Agriculture*

*Q:* Since for most people in this country, farming is still the major source of livelihood, it would be good to take a look at agriculture. How do the different ethnic communities fare in this respect?

*A:* Let's start with this fact. Most of the farming in Sri Lanka is carried out in the Dry Zone, and the critical resource needed for farming in the Dry Zone is water. To ensure an adequate water supply, irrigation is of paramount importance. Recognising this fact, successive governments have invested heavily on irrigation in the Dry Zone. The Mahaveli project is the most important of the commitments made to farming and irrigation. However, the Dry Zone Tamil areas lag behind, and appear to have been neglected. This is brought out by Table 8, which shows the extent of land irrigated in key Sinhala and Tamil farming areas in the Dry Zone.

*Table 8: Land size and percentages of sown land irrigated in the Dry Zone (Maha 1979/80)*

<i>Sinhala Districts</i>	<i>% irrigated</i>	<i>Av. size of holding</i>
Puttalam	79.7	3.4
Moneragala	63.2	3.9
Anuradhapura	92.7	4.1
Polonnaruwa	95.3	4.0
Hambantota	92.5	3.0
<i>Tamil districts</i>	<i>% irrigated</i>	<i>Av. size of holding</i>
Jaffna	31.6	1.3
Vavuniya	83.4	5.7
Mannar	94.7	3.7
Trincomalee	56.6	3.1
Batticaloa	30.4	2.7

*Source:* Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Plan Implementations, Socio-Economic Indicators of Sri Lanka, Feb 83, p. 283

*Q:* What does this table show?

*A:* That except for the Mannar District the other Tamil areas have had much scantier irrigation facilities than the Sinhala areas.

*Q:* What is the relevance of the figures indicating average size of land-holding?

*A:* Their significance comes out when you set them side by side with

the figures for the percentage of fallow (unutilised) agricultural land in each zone: I 10.3%, II 11.8%, III 20.6%, IV 14.5%, V 13.8% and island average 13.7% (Report on Consumer Finance and Socio-Economic Survey, 1978/9, p. 49, Table 33). When considering the lack of irrigation, it is not surprising that the proportion of land left uncultivated is highest in Zone III, that is, the Tamil areas of the North.

### *Thesawalamai*

*Q:* Is it true that Sinhalese cannot buy land in Jaffna?

*A:* Muslims, Burghers and Sinhalese have, in fact, bought land in Jaffna.

*Q:* Then why is there a popular perception that Sinhalese cannot buy land in Jaffna?

*A:* Under the *Thesawalamai*, there is a concept of pre-emption under which co-owners, co-heirs and adjacent landowners – who had a mortgage over property located in the Northern Province – have the first option of purchase. It is not racial exclusion but an exclusion peculiar to the nature of an agricultural community. Today, in fact, the owner only need give notice before selling in the open market.

*Q:* What is the *Thesawalamai*?

*A:* The *Thesawalamai*, like the traditional laws of the Kandyan Sinhalese, is a system of customary law which existed before the colonial era and is applicable to all persons who are 'Malabar Inhabitants of the Province of Jaffna'.

*Q:* Why are there so few Sinhalese settled in the Northern Province in recent years?

*A:* Migratory patterns in Sri Lanka have pushed members of all communities who wish to better their prospects into the cities, such as Colombo and its vicinity. Besides, land in Jaffna is relatively unfertile and would not have attracted migrants interested in an agricultural livelihood. It could be argued that the paucity of Sinhalese settlers in the Northern Province exists for the same reason that there is perhaps a paucity of Tamil settlers in Hambantota.

### *Central government capital expenditure*

*Q:* There is an impression that the Jaffna District is specially favoured with regard to government capital expenditure. Is this correct?

*A:* No. In the District Budget for the year 1982, the amount allocated to the Jaffna District for new works was only Rs. 27 million. This shows up the smallness of the District Budget and its very limited capacity to spearhead decentralised development.

In the case of the Central Budget, an analysis of the figures in the

Ministry of Plan Implementation Performance, 1981, shows that capital expenditure in the Jaffna District was only Rs. 260 million – that is, only 2.6% of the national capital expenditure of nine billion rupees.

*Q:* How does this work out in terms of per capita expenditure?

*A:* The per capita capital expenditure in the Jaffna District is Rs. 313, while the national per capita expenditure is Rs. 656. In addition, foreign aid utilisation in the Jaffna District for the period 1977-82 was 0. (*Sources:* Analysis from Ministry of Plan Implementation Performance, 1981; Central Bank Review of the Economy, 1981; Government Budget Estimates, 1981.)

*Q:* Aren't these figures of per capita capital expenditure affected by the fact that national expenditure on special projects such as the Mahaveli, housing and the Free Trade Zone, are targeted for certain areas and none of them are located in the North?

*A:* That is so, and for the same reason, other areas unaffected by such projects – such as Galle or Kalutara – show figures similar to those of Jaffna. Also Jaffna District has been unrepresented in successive governments, and therefore has benefited little from government development policy. However, what the figures do show is that the Jaffna District is clearly not a most favoured district, as some people have tried to make out.

#### *The private sector*

*Q:* There is an impression that the private sector of the economy is dominated by Tamil interests? Is this correct?

*A:* In the large public quoted companies there is a diversity of shareholders, interlocking directorates, bank indentures, etc. The large industrial houses are not and cannot be run like corner boutiques with a single proprietor making lone profits. The interconnections between different interests are still more difficult to ascertain today, because of foreign investment. However, as far as predominantly Sinhala-owned or Tamil-owned enterprises are concerned, the Gnanams and Maharajahs are surely matched by the Upali Group, Dasa Group, B.P. de Silva Group, Maliban Group, Nawaloka enterprises, Ebert Silva, De Soysa's Associated Industries, Wijewardene's Group, etc.

*Q:* Are the sources of credit for business controlled by Tamil interests?

*A:* No. The main sources of credit are the banks. The Bank of Ceylon, the People's Bank, the State Mortgage and Investment Bank, the Development Finance Corporation, etc., are state enterprises. The primary shareholders of the Hatton National Bank are Browns Ltd, a company with a majority of Sinhala shareholders. All other banks are



controlled by foreign shareholders with foreign managing directors who assess projects on viability alone.

*Q:* What explains the fact that trade and business have been one of the main avenues of social advancement for Tamils?

*A:* The Tamils were never large landowners or estate owners like the Sinhala upper classes. Only a handful were affected by land reform. The most lucrative export sector of tea, coconut, and rubber even before nationalisation, was never dominated by Tamils. It has been observed in many societies that those who do not hold land tend to go into professions and business. The Tamils as an ethnic group have followed this path, like many ethnic groups before them in Europe, Asia and Africa. There is nothing sinister, deceptive or exploitative about this: it is an understandable social phenomenon.

*Q:* Are there any published statistics of the ethnic composition of directors and proprietors in private sector companies?

*A:* No, but an analysis of the Commercial Company list in Ferguson's Directors 1979-81 (pages 1001-1038) shows that 18.62% of directors, 20.96% of chairmen, 20.54% of partners/proprietors in these companies are Tamil.

*Q:* Why should Sinhalese not overreact to statistics?

*A:* The recent frenzy over statistics on Tamil dominance avoids one inescapable fact. At present the Sinhalese are in *absolute* control of the national legislature and therefore in absolute control of national economic policy. Very few Tamils can receive jobs through state patronage; they can only succeed in private self-employment or in the professions. With control over national economic policy, the Sinhalese have the absolute power to direct the course of our economic future. Statistics and social figures can be managed and changed over time, to maximise opportunities for all communities. The inability to do so is not the diabolical plot of an ethnic minority, but the failure of our political leaders to direct and manage a modern, equitable economy.

### *Political violence*

*Q:* Isn't the present violence really a product of the movement for a separate state and the use of political violence in the North?

*A:* The situation is not so simple. Those political developments are often given as the principal reasons for the present crisis. They have to some extent accentuated the crisis, but that is only one side of the story. In 1958, there was no separatist movement. The Tamils were asking for language rights and Federalism and used only non-violent tactics. Violence was still directed at them. For a rational discussion of the facts, we cannot ignore the responsibility that the state must bear for accelerating the cycle of violence.

*Q:* But hasn't the demand for language rights been settled since 1978?

*A:* The 1978 Constitution accords Tamil the status of a national language. Yet many government offices continue to send documents only in Sinhala. Anyway, the status of national language does fall short of the declared policy of both the UNP and the SLFP, until 1955, to make Tamil an official language. We must try to understand the social and historical reasons which gave rise to the above movements if we are to find an effective political solution. We must learn not to give into a blind sense of loyalty without a rational and historical appreciation of the facts. If we do so, we will only help divide the country.

*Q:* Surely state violence was only in response to terrorist violence in the North?

*A:* That is not entirely correct. As far back as 1961, peaceful Tamil *satyagrahis* were attacked. In 1972 Amnesty International reported the arrest and detention without trial of forty-two young members of the Tamil community who were staging peaceful protests, such as the display of black flags against the policy of standardisation and the Republican Constitution. Annual reports from Amnesty International and the ICJ from 1976 detail torture inflicted on Tamil youths held in detention. In December 1974, police opened fire at the scene of a Tamil cultural show, held at the closing sessions of the conference of the International Association of Tamil Research. Eight persons died. It was after 1977 that Tamil youths began their systematic campaign of violence.

*Q:* Are you trying to justify the violence of the Northern militants?

*A:* No. But we must look at the accelerating crisis with fairness and impartiality. Our media continues to give us only one side of the question. The present situation is a result of many complex factors. It is often difficult to separate cause and effect. Unless we look at the issues with clear-sightedness, we will not be able to provide the social and political solutions necessary for the resolution of the present conflict.

*Q:* But they, the Tamils, are trying to destroy us, how can you be so calm and detached? We Sinhalese have nowhere else to go, this is our only home.

*A:* If we feel we are a united nation, there can be no question of 'we' or 'they'. Justice is not only supposed to be rational but race blind. If we continue to think in terms of 'we' and 'they', we will turn the present conflict into a savage tribal war. Those who overreact to problems and thereby destabilise the country and the South Asian region, will create the very nightmares they so desperately fear.

*Decentralisation*

*Q:* Why are the Sinhalese so afraid of conceding regional autonomy to Tamil-dominated areas?

*A:* Because they are afraid that this will be a first step toward Eelam.

*Q:* Is their fear justified?

*A:* No, in other countries this has not occurred; in fact, most often the issue subsides. With greater regional autonomy, the Quebec nationalists, the Basque nationalists and even Tamil Nadu nationalists have begun to work within the framework of a united state.

*Q:* Will the northern extremists be satisfied?

*A:* Even if they are not, a solution agreed to by a moderate majority in Jaffna and supported by the Indian government will alienate the users of violence from their own people. This occurred in Quebec and is beginning to happen in the Basque region of Spain. After a period of amnesty, with the help of the Indian government through extradition agreements, etc. it will be easier to control their violent activities.

*Q:* Aren't these 'decentralisation' ideas new to Sri Lanka?

*A:* Actually, these ideas have been circulated since the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1925, SWRD Bandaranaike himself, put forward a federal structure of government for Sri Lanka with nine separate regional units. Before him, the Kandyan leaders in the Ceylon Congress also put forward ideas for a federal structure consisting of three units. In 1940, the colonial government introduced provincial councils, but though approved in parliament they were not implemented.

*Q:* Have any of the major Sinhalese parties after independence ever entertained such a scheme?

*A:* Both the UNP and the SLFP had, before 1977, negotiated decentralised arrangements, but they failed to implement them. The Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact, for example, agreed to the creation of two or more decentralised regions and allowed room for parliament to delegate powers in certain areas. It was a very comprehensive Federal solution. The UNP in 1965 also concluded a fairly similar Pact, but it too was not implemented.

*Q:* Why aren't the Tamils satisfied with the District Development Council (DDC) scheme?

*A:* The DDC scheme, in some ways, falls short of the other Pacts for the following reasons:

(a) The district minister, an appointment of the President, is chairman of the Executive Committee and can block all decisions of the DDC, if he chooses to.

(b) The line ministries must approve all projects of the DDC in their area. As we all know, ministers jealously guard their preserves and do not often like to share power and control.

(c) The district budget so far has been very small – 40 million for both old and new works for each district. Considering the wide range of projects that the DDCs may wish to engage in, the budget so far has completely limited their scope.

(d) Any decisions agreed to by the DDC can be overridden by the President and/or parliament.

(e) The DDC is only statutory legislation and has no constitutional validity. It can easily be swept away by a simple majority vote in parliament.

The DDCs, then, are mere administrative arrangements, vulnerable to the contradictory personalities of ministers and the sudden shifts of presidential and parliamentary power.

*Q:* What kind of schemes do other countries have?

*A:* In most democratic countries with an ethnic minority which is territorially placed, decentralisation has been the political answer. In addition, for administrative reasons, countries prefer to have a decentralised political structure for effective planning and diverse development. In India, US, Australia, Canada, etc., the federal system gives much power to the decentralised units. These units have their own courts, own executive, own legislature, and the federal government can only interfere in situations of national concern, such as foreign policy, interstate commerce, defence, currency, taxation, immigration, protection of fundamental rights, the national development plan, etc. Except in these specified instances, the decentralised units may govern themselves, though they may look to the central government for additional financial resources and projects. In other countries in Europe – France, Spain, the Federal Republic of Germany – similar arrangements exist.

*Q:* Those are large countries – isn't Sri Lanka far too small for this type of arrangement?

*A:* No, we have before us the example of Switzerland. In tourist literature we are often called the Switzerland of the East.

*Q:* What is the Swiss solution like?

*A:* The Swiss system has some of the following features:

(a) A federal system composed of twenty-two cantons – each with its own elected legislature and executive.

(b) The cantons have extensive spending and taxing powers. In addition, the cantons have legislative powers within their area of jurisdiction.

(c) Each canton has its own constitution and its own system of courts, but with a superseding federal court to determine issues of national importance – or inter-cantonal disputes.

(d) Though there are certain national standards, each canton has its own system of schools and universities.

(e) The federal legislature itself contains two houses – the first is like our parliament (called the National Council), the second contains two representatives from each canton and is called the Council of States.

(f) The federal assembly only has certain specified legislative powers in the constitution – all residual powers rest with the cantons. The federal powers are related to defence, posts, army, national economic policy, foreign policy, currency, etc.

(g) The Swiss constitution recognises three official languages – German, French and Italian. All cantons also have an enlightened policy of extending official recognition to all the spoken languages.

(h) Religion – the people of each canton are free to determine the nature of state-religious relations. This is due to the fact that there is a large non-Catholic minority in Switzerland.

(i) Each canton is also responsible for public order within its boundaries – own police force and public service.

*Q:* Isn't that too much for Sri Lanka?

*A:* We don't have to adopt their model completely, but just learn from their example. Switzerland is a country where modern leaders from traditionally warring communities have managed to negotiate an enlightened settlement.

*Q:* Isn't all this too risky and uncertain, why should we even begin to think in this manner?

*A:* We stand at the crossroads of history. We can either become the Switzerland of the East – by following the middle path of negotiation, conciliation, and goodwill – or the Lebanon of South Asia – where intransigence, violence and hate have made it a playground for destruction in which all the powers of the world have a stake.

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# July 1983 and the national question in Sri Lanka: a bibliographical guide

## Introduction

'If we believe in absurdities, we shall commit atrocities.' *Voltaire*

The month of July in 1983 witnessed an unprecedented communal holocaust in which the Tamil community in Sri Lanka suffered enormous destruction and loss of life, besides large-scale destitution and homelessness. Sinhalese chauvinism has deep historical, cultural, social and psychological roots which, in turn, have bred an equally determined and militant stance on the part of the Tamils for the assertion of their cultural identity and fundamental rights, as well as aspirations to self-determination and regional autonomy. Since Independence the deepening hostility between the Sinhalese and Tamils has become a depressing fact of political life, but the repeated outbreaks of violence after 1956 seem minor upheavals compared to the scale and ferocity of the carnage, arson and looting in 1983. The resulting exposure and comment in the foreign media have seriously embarrassed the government and despoiled the conventional image of Sri Lanka as a paradisiacal haven of democratic peace and harmony in the Indian Ocean. A stringent censorship imposed on a largely pliant domestic press has proved an insufficient barrier to the escape of truth in the international media. Strenuous attempts at covering up continue to be made, in order that the true dimensions of these sad and tragic events may be concealed or thwarted in their discussion. The techniques of double-think and double-talk are in full flow, and the current binds on the freedom of expression have transformed Sri Lanka into a less than informed society.

To diligent and discerning observers of the degenerating trends in public life since 1977, the massive haemorrhage did not come as a surprise. The

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democratic process had been eroded by a combination of ad hoc constitutional amendments and legislative enactments; demagoguery accompanied by overt and covert forms of thuggery had virtually institutionalised political violence; while the electoral process received its final *coup de grace* in 1982. But most menacing of all, perhaps, was the open incitement of racial prejudice at the highest levels. The well-heeled conscience of the stricken bourgeoisie was stretched on the rack, but too few among them reacted with shock, revulsion, horror and concern. Well-meaning efforts at reconciliation and contrition abound, however, and sincere exponents of moral rearmament are busy building bridges of national unity and communal concord. But, in the end, their work, as in the past, is likely to be as inconclusive as their clichés. As the emotions of the July crisis recede, the harsh realities and stark questions reassert their claim for resolution. The grave underlying implications of what has taken place cannot be concealed by proclamations of 'normalcy'; neither can caricatured versions of history serve the purpose of confirming old prejudices and reinstating congenial racial myths. The politics of manipulation and terror, parading as democracy, need to be exposed so that some intelligent, civilised, rational perspectives, permeated by fresh convictions and new energies, may be restored. The values of justice, equality and civility have virtually to be exhumed.

It is not far from the truth that a high degree of political pusillanimity and moral cowardice have contributed largely to this 'crisis of civilisation' in a Buddhist land, hitherto reputed for its tolerance of other faiths, and respect for human rights in theory and in practice. If the President now keeps repeating, as he is wont to do, that an 'irreconcilable and unbridgeable gulf' exists between the Sinhalese and Tamil positions, then it is to be feared that little, if anything, has been learned and even less forgotten after the tragic catastrophe of July 1983. A Round Table Conference, promised since 1977, and subject to prolonged misgivings, misconceptions and false starts, got off the ground at last in January 1984. It has raised more problems than it originally agreed to solve, and frequent adjournments and changes in dramatis personae have neither increased the climate of accommodation nor diminished the potential for conflict. The continuing reliance on a military solution, repressive legislation, and a near-permanent Emergency has vitiated the arena of reconciliation and mutual trust. The conduct of the Conference itself appears to have favoured the exacerbation of conflict positions and inflexible attitudes without advancing, in any significant measure, an acceptable approach to an enduring political solution of the problem of an oppressed national minority, through institutions of genuine devolution of power.

As this bibliography lays bare, dispassionate and collected appraisals continue to collide with frenzied expressions of a narrow bigotry, while the quixotic bravura of a national minority duels with the arrogant hauteur of a national majority. A serious lack of self-awareness seems evident in both combatants, and a failure to face up to the realities of their respective situations in the real world, within and without the national borders. But this is not to deny to the Tamils the right to espouse their legitimate demands for the satisfaction of national self-respect and dignity, and the freedom to pursue the same privileges and opportunities which the Sinhalese now seek to proclaim as their sole prerogative. This latter deviation from the accepted norms of the Sri Lankan identity in a multi-ethnic society constitutes the classic imbroglio of late



twentieth century Sri Lanka. Only Sri Lankans acting as a whole in defiance of present tendencies, and mindful of their past and future destinies can deliver the country out of its current nightmare. That possibility cannot be allowed to remain a remote dream. Until then, however, the spate of resentment and recrimination is unlikely to cease, because the issues seem further away from a settlement than at one time they appeared likely to be. The stage settings in this macabre and squalid drama need to be changed, else the main actors are fated to keep repeating their lines, entries and exits, while the unhappy and captive audience on both sides of the Palk Strait become less hopeful of a happy ending to what is already the longest running 'Theatre of the Absurd' in Sri Lanka.

It is a dismal truth of recent times that the public and private conscience has been threatened by an environment of intimidation, and insensitised by a climate of fear. The perverse insanity of racial terrorism and the obscene variations of communal animosity have been encouraged thereby. The culture of fear and silence, in which intellectuals and writers have become their own policemen, has extended the opportunities for more, and not less, authoritarianism. The stage has been reached in the words of Bertrand Russell of 'fascinating fools and muzzling the intelligent by emotional excesses on the one hand and terrorism on the other'. The decay of language into a variety of Orwellian 'newspeak' reflects the political disintegration around us — a return to sanity and commonsense cannot do better than begin with verbal precision and consistency. The state-controlled media in Sri Lanka operate on the principle that the common people are easy prey to deception, and even the intelligentsia can be rendered knowledge-proof. But continued censorship in a democracy is an affront to the collective intelligence of the community. Hope lingers, perhaps, in the heartening glimmer of optimism that the conflict has not yet infiltrated the hearts and minds of all the people. The prevailing body politic, rotten and effete at the core, may still contain the canker of racial antagonism, becoming both its cradle as well as its coffin. The fatal next step can only be averted by a decisive and statesmanlike blow for justice and equality — but the present social and political formations, which provide the current leadership of Sri Lankan society, appear sadly to have shot their bolt. The communal problem, though crucial, is only one of the many-sided consequences of the national crisis which is still unfolding.

This bibliography represents an attempt to provide a cogent, comprehensive, and concentrated array of documentation on the national question in Sri Lanka and the sanguinary outrage in July 1983. While it is primarily intended to supplement the purposes of the volume in which it appears, it has also been designed with less temporary objectives in view. It may, therefore, be consulted with profit by all those curious enough to contemplate the excesses of racial hate on a historic island, renowned for its ancient civilisation derived from India, and the culture of Buddhism.

The bibliography is basically in two sections: A — 'The national question: perceptions and performance', and B — 'July 1983: outrage and outcome'. Part A is preceded by a brief list of 34 basic historical works which provide a broad framework of historical understanding for the initiate into the main strands of Sri Lanka's evolution from a pre-feudal society into a modern nation state. Part A, which comprises 167 entries, constitutes a significant and relevant point of entry into the intricacies of the Tamil question in Sri Lanka vis-à-vis the impact of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. Part B, containing 405 entries,

represents a wide range of responses to the cataclysm of July 1983. The entire spectrum of views and evaluations of the 'national question' began to be re-aired in urgent and pointed fashion (in the columns of the English press in Sri Lanka and abroad) and the intelligentsia have been fortunate to be educated all over again on the evolution and contemporary import of the racial issues which threaten to tear the fabric of Sri Lankan society apart. An earlier version of this part was done for Human Rights Day (10 December, 1983), and the same motives have impelled the compiler into this more complete and definitive exercise.

Books, articles in periodicals, contributions to newspapers, official documents, and material of a fugitive or unpublished nature have been included, but there is, admittedly, no desire to approach exhaustiveness. The principal purpose is to offer an appropriate and representative selection of literature, to which the average reader may not have easy access, to enable the twin demands of study and enlightenment to be met. The entries are arranged alphabetically by author, or title (in the absence of an author) in each part, and enough data for identification are supplied. The constraints of space, the swift tenor of preparation, and the prevailing censorship restricted the design of the bibliography. Annotations to highlight, clarify and discriminate between entries had to be eschewed, and the motif of enumerative documentation took precedence over the demands of commentary. Users of this bibliography who wish to read more widely on pertinent dimensions and facets of this central issue in the Sri Lankan racial divide may consult the relevant chapters or sections of H.A.I. Goonetilleke's *A Bibliography of Ceylon (Sri Lanka)*, Volumes 1-5 (1970-83), especially the literature concerning history, religion, social organisation, nationalism and revivalist trends, ethnic cleavages and conflicts. Volumes 6 and 7 are in preparation and will contain the literature on the 'national question' as it unfolded in painful sequence from 1979 to 1984. The annotations, excluded here, may be encountered in these volumes in the future.

It is in the nature of any bibliographical exercise, whether retrospective or current, that time imposes its inescapable bar at some point, even though the literature on the subject keeps flowing. The collection of material for this work terminated in the first week of May 1984, and it is regretted that some important literature after that date has had to be omitted. It is necessary to mention two significant contributions later in the same month in this connection, and readers are advised to consult these as well. (1) *Ethnicity and social change in Sri Lanka. Papers presented to a Seminar of the Social Scientists Association* (Colombo, 1984). The twelve essays by various hands throw a revealing light on the issues. (2) *National identity in a multi-ethnic society. Seminar held at the Marga Institute, 7th-11th May 1984* (especially the papers by Nihal Jayawickrama, 'National identity - a human rights approach'; C.R. Hensman, 'Sri Lankan identity, racism and the people's solidarity in the contemporary world'; S. Tennekoon, 'Sinhala and Tamil identity formation: an historical review from earliest times till 1848'; L. Kurukulasuriya, 'Self-image of the Tamil community: a brief sketch'; R. Siriwardena, 'National identity in Sri Lanka: problems in communication education'; and, Jehan Perera, 'National identity, opposition, war and peace'). In addition, the unpublished transcript proceedings of the Round Table Conference, which began on 19 January, 1984, are bound to offer many insights on all sides of the ethnic fence. The terse, even cryptic, official press communiqués issued after each session serve to provoke

speculation rather than to inform. The apparent futility and depressing outcome of this much-vaunted exercise can only be clarified by access to the record of proceedings.

In conclusion, I wish to thank those friends and colleagues who helped in various ways, offering specific assistance and moral support, in the course of compilation.

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