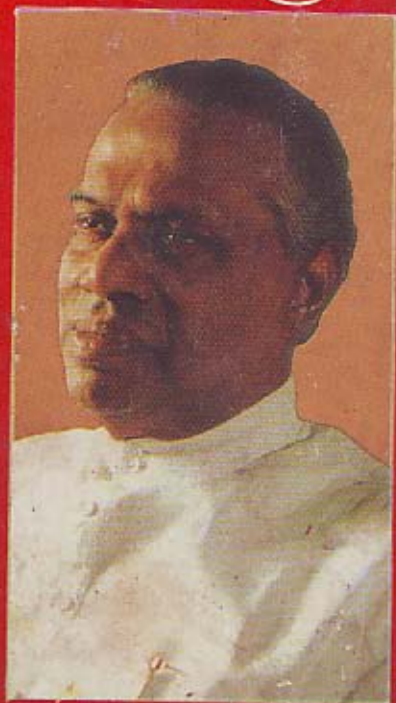


Out of Bondage



The THONDAMAN STORY
T. SABARATNAM



OUT OF BONDAGE

A Biography

OUT OF BONDAGE

A BIOGRAPHY

T. Sabaratnam

FIRST PUBLISHED 1990

To the memory of my Father and Mother who served in
the tea and rubber estates in their youth.

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The Sri Lanka Indian Community Council.

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FORWARD

By

The Sri Lanka Indian Community Council,

This is an unusual foreward: one written collectively by the representatives of the Indian Tamil community in Sri Lanka. The decision to vary the practice of writing a forward was consciously taken in order to place on record the people's gratitude to the services of their unusual leader.

Our story is very unusual. In Ceylon we enjoyed equal rights under the British rule but were made virtual political outcasts in 1948 through the machination of the Ceylon Citizenship Act. Most of us were made political destitutes; stateless persons, without any basic human rights. The right of citizenship was stripped from us; the right of franchise denied. The story of how our revered leader Savumiamoorthy Thondaman won us those lost rights is what this book records.

The story of our leader's continuous battle to win for us economic and social emancipation is indeed dramatic. Many of our forefathers were brought to Ceylon by deception and inducement to be kept in bondage in the tea and rubber gardens which they toiled to establish. They were kept securely tied to the tea bush and rubber trees. They were treated as serfs; traded with the estates like goods. They were denied all avenues of advancement and were kept the most backward section of Sri Lankan society. They were paid low; exploited most. Thondaman had secured for them some relief. The struggle to obtain more continues.

Thondaman's personal life is out of the ordinary. He migrated to Sri Lanka at the age of eleven in 1924 as heir to immense wealth his father Karuppaiah had accumulated through hard toil and business prowess. Thondaman could have lived as Sri Lanka's wealthiest person by managing that wealth, as his father had

wished him to do. But he chose the difficult path of working for the upliftment of his community; his people That entailed for him many hardships — physical danger and financial losses. He kept marching along the path of his choice and had succeeded in getting us deliverance.

Thondaman's public life and achievements are unparalleled. He has won for us, his people, a place in the centre of Sri Lanka's political arena. He has won for us respect, a thing denied the last four decades. He has built for us a strong trade union and political organisation — the CWC. He has built among us unity, discipline, a desire to march forward. He has made us a people.

The way he achieved it is unique. He put all his effort on building up a well-knit organisation, the CWC. He used that strength to win his demands. He chose a democratic path; a non-violent way. He was the master in the art of negotiation. Accurate timing was just one weapon in his arsenal.

He has now emerged a national leader above par. He has saved Sri Lanka twice; in 1978 by helping President Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister to conclude a peace accord and in July 1989, by helping both countries to shake hands again.

This book 'Out of Bondage', by a respected senior journalist, is the ring side story of Thondaman's achievements. This is the story by one who had reported him for over three decades; by one who was close to him; who knew his mind.

'Out of Bondage' is now a physical fact and the book is a literary account of how this came about and makes a significant contribution to the meager material on the subject presently available to general reader and the interested researcher.

— The Sri Lanka Indian Community Council

Colombo.
3-11-1989.

A NOTE BY THE AUTHOR

This is the third book on the leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, Savumiamoorthy Thondaman. The first was the autobiography, 'My Life and Times', released on March 2, 1988. The second was a biography, 'Thalaivar Thondaman', by that doyen of Tamil journalists S. T. Sivanayagam, who in his first chapter enumerated many areas for future writing. I chose political biography.

I selected this area because political journalism is my own chosen vocation. I have reported Thondaman for over three decades. My first interview with him was on April, 1957, when I was a cub-reporter with the Tamil daily *Thinakaran*. I interviewed him on the CWC-DWC clashes which heaped additional hardships on the down-trodden estates workers.

The first time I heard Thondaman speak was in 1956. He was the star speaker at the Federal Party election meeting held at the Jaffna town hall, where he announced his decision to campaign for the Tamil cause. Till then, he said, he had concentrated on the problems of estate workers.

Within three years after my first interview I watched Thondaman take on a national role. He helped the SLFP break the March 1960 Dudley Senanayake government and assisted Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike come to power. He then moved to the centre of the political stage, helping the UNP to form governments.

I was one of the few Lankan journalists who watched Thondaman steer the plantation Indian Tamil community out of the left political orbit into which Abdul Aziz had dragged it. Thondaman drew the community closer to the UNP, while keeping its political independence. This gave him and the CWC room to manoeuvre as in November, 1988, when he threatened to bargain with the SLFP.

I had the habit of preserving my notes of the interviews with Thondaman. I also kept notes of my meetings

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with Thondaman and the events in which he participated. I collected papers clippings of important events concerning him—and I drew from all these sources for this book. For the earlier period I depended on the autobiography, S. T. Sivanayagam's biography, interviews I had with Thondaman in April and May, 1989 and the material I collected from his colleagues, most of whom I knew.

I owe special thanks to the following persons: B. Thirunavukkarasu, Minister Thondaman's Co-ordinating Officer who coaxed me into taking on this project; P. Sivarajah, the minister's Public Relations Officer, for encouraging, Mrs. Chandra de Silva of the Daily News for her guidance and able editing; S. P. Amarasingam for his constructive suggestions and my wife for her assistance.

I must also thank the printers Dumindha Erandha (Pvt.) Ltd. for their able, speedy work; and for the cover. Vachikara Advertising.

August 30, 1989.

T. Sabaratnam,

CHAPTER I

TWO INTERVIEWS

I begin this narrative with two significant interviews I had with Thondaman. The first was in 1978, when the Ceylon Workers Congress was intensely debating President Jayewardene's invitation to it to join the government. The second was ten years later in 1988, the day Parliament passed the special law to grant citizenship to all stateless persons.

President Jayewardene's invitation was made in the third week of August I met Thondaman on September 4, the day before the CWC Executive Council meeting. By that time the decision to accept the invitation had been taken and the resolution was being drafted to be placed before the council. I asked Thondaman the reason for the decision.

"There are many", he replied, "but the most important is President Jayewardene".

President Jayewardene, he said, was anxious to solve the citizenship problem and he was the only Sinhala leader sympathetic towards the stateless Tamils. The SLFP leader, Sirima Bandaranaike, lacked sympathy for the stateless and had no understanding of the problem.

"Still more important is the fact that President Jayewardene is the only Sinhala leader with the political strength and moral courage needed to solve the citizenship problem. He also knows the political importance of the Indian Tamil vote. If he happens to be in the opposition he will never permit the SLFP to grant citizenship and win over the Indian block vote.

He also explained the bi-polar nature of Sri Lankan politics and the relative organisational strengths of the UNP and the SLFP. With the better organisation at its command the UNP in the opposition could play havoc while the SLFP lacked the capacity for direct action.

"The SLFP can only issue statements and make platform speeches. They have no power to block any legislation that President Jayewardene decides to enact", he said. Subsequent events proved him correct.

The real problem, he said, was within the UNP. It had its quota of extremists who were blocking President Jayewardene's efforts to resolve the ethnic and citizenship issues. By joining the government he would strengthen President Jayewardene's hand within the cabinet. Thondaman said.

"And another thing", he said this smiling mischievously; "It's the UNP which deprived us of our citizenship and voting rights. We must make the same UNP give them back to us!"

Thondaman then pointed out the difficulties President Jayewardene and the CWC might have to encounter, the SLFP and the extremist section of the Buddhist clergy which would whip up communal feelings. He recalled the happenings of the 1965-70 Dudley Senanayake period. "Dudley by nature was a timid man. He easily became upset. J.R. is a different kettle of fish".

Then he pointed to the fate of the LSSP: "Once you are in power you tend to lose your base. N. M. (Dr. N. M. Perera) not only lost his base but his image too. From a strike leader he became a strike-breaker. He failed to nurse his base while in power. He used his trade unions to break strikes and in the process broke his own unions".

He would avoid the mistake that the LSSP and to some extent, the Communist Party made, Thondaman said.

"I am joining the government not to be a 'yes man' in the Cabinet, I have made this clear to the President. I will be my people's representative in the Cabinet and voice their grievances and their needs".

My second interview with Thondaman was on November 19, 1988. He had just returned from parliament to his tastefully furnished ninth-floor office of the Rural Industrial Development Ministry at Kollupitiya. The law to end statelessness had been enacted that day and I asked him to describe his feelings.

"I feel very, very, very happy", he said and added: "Forty years of suffering for my people have ended".

Suddenly his mood changed. He stared hard at me, then said: "My people have had to go through really hard times. Now, at last, they will be able to live with dignity and honour".

Afterward, we discussed S. T. Sivanayagam's researches which had brought to light many unknown details of his father's childhood; and his own researches and readings which had shed light on the early history of Indian immigration.

His own name Savumiamoorthy was derived from Sri Savumia Narayana Perumal, the deity of the temple in Thondaman's ancestral village. Muna Pudur, now a prosperous agricultural hamlet in Pasumpon district, earlier known as Ramnad. This temple and its reigning deity occupy a central place in Thondaman's life and that of his family.

It was at this temple that Karuppaiah, Thondaman's father, prayed one morning in the year 1873 before setting out to Sri Lanka, known then as Ceylon, with Maruthappan Kankani, Karuppaiah was then known as Kumaravel, the name given by his parents. He was then 13 years old.

Karuppaiah joined Maruthappan's 'gang' without the knowledge of his parents. The people of his village said he had run away. He was one of the many men and boys who attended the meeting arranged by Maruthappan Kankani, who had returned to his village on holiday, after a stint on a coffee estate in Gampola.

Maruthappan told them that he had been asked by his employer, a white 'durai', to bring back some workers — then called 'coolies' — to work on his estate. The wages were good and accommodation would be provided, he promised.

Look at me. I went to Ceylon and I am doing well now. You also can be like me if you come with me", he said.

Karuppaiah stood up. "Can small boys like me come too", he asked.

Of course. Small boys are welcome", Maruthappan replied.

"Then take down my name sir", Karuppalah said.

So Maruthappan Kankani took down Karuppalah's name. Many others joined him.

There was no difficulty in those days about recruiting work gangs for foreign lands. A prolonged drought in many parts of Madras state had ruined agriculture. Many proud and once prosperous families had been reduced to penury.

Families were fleeing the villages in waves to the towns and to foreign lands, in search of food and employment. They went to neighbouring Ceylon where people were needed to clear the forests and prepare the land for planting coffee. They went also to Burma, Malaysia, Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa and even to the far off West Indies.

To all countries including Ceylon they were recruited under the arrangement called the 'indenture system'. Under this system, introduced by the British Indian government to minimise the abuses connected with recruitment labour contractors were permitted to recruit workers on contract for a specified period. The worker was bound to his employer for an agreed period on a fixed wage and provided free abode, medical care and certain other amenities. The worker was liable to be punished for breach of contract if he deserted his employer, either to return to India or join other estates.

The 'indenture system' was not popular in Ceylon because there was a free flow of labour from Tamil Nadu, especially from the Ramnad, Tinnavelly, Tiruchirappalli, Salem, and Arcot districts. This was for two reasons: the close proximity of India and Ceylon and the development of the kankani system.

A kankani was an enterprising migrant labourer with the organisational flair to collect a 'gang' of 40 or 50 labourers under him. He was a father figure, leader of his group, who looked after their welfare. He normally recruited his 'gang' from among his relatives and friends in his village. This gave the 'gang' unity and a common interest. This system enabled British planters to tap an easy source of labour and freed them from the worrisome burden of conforming to the British Indian government's

labour ordinances. The Madras officials and the Government of Ceylon did not interfere.

The kankani system also gave scope for exploitation. The kankani soon emerged as a money lender and workers under him became eternal debtors. This lender-borrower relationship kept the workers tied to the kankani and his estate. Labourers were not free to switch estates unless they settled their debts with the kankani.

Maruthappan, though a kankani did not recruit under the kankani system. He recruited Karuppalah and others as casual hands who were engaged by the estate when there was additional work such as clearing, planting or weeding. The estates preferred this because they were not bound to give the accommodation or the other facilities that went with the contract. Also, they could be paid less than the legal wage. The workers benefited too as they enjoyed the freedom to switch estates and were free to return to their villages in India whenever they desired.

Maruthappan explained all this to his countrymen, most of whom were his relatives. The decision, he said, was entirely theirs. He was only offering them an opportunity,

"Some of you can rise, like me, to be a kankani. One or two can even get rich like Muthaiah", he added.

Muthaiah was a retail trader who owned two retail shops, one in Gampola and the other near the coffee estate on which Maruthappan worked. He had returned to Muna Pudur with a lot of money and fancy goods. His family was prosperous. Karuppalah had seen his children, well dressed and fondly indulged.

Karuppalah kept his decision secret. He did not even tell his mother whom he adored. He did not speak about it to his friends. On the fifth morning after the meeting he went to Thirukosdiyur temple and worshipped there. He was overcome by emotion and wept. He knew he was taking a gamble. Like some of his relatives who had gone to Ceylon earlier, he might die of disease on the way or be killed by wild animals.

But he had made up his mind.

"I'll toil, I'll earn, I'll return a rich man", he vowed. "My God, help me achieve this".

That evening Muna Pudur village hummed with the news that Karuppaiah had run away.

The gang of forty, which included some women, walked from Muna Pudur to Thondi, an ancient port, and took a bote to Pampan. From there, they walked again to Mandapam, where they completed the quarantine procedures. From Mandapam, they took a larger boat to Pesalai, in the Mannar district. The boatman charged 25 cents per passenger. Maruthappan paid the fare for all.

Muthaiah, the more prosperous, took a different route. He went to Madurai and took a train to Tuticorin and sailed by a steamer to Colombo, paying a fare of three rupees, a lot of money in those days. He then travelled from Colombo to Gampola by train. The train service had been extended to Gampola early that year—1873.

Maruthappan's group started walking from Mannar to Gampola early the next morning. They followed the usual route of Indian migrant labour from the early 1810s. It was called the vada pathai, meaning the northern road.

They passed through Uyllankulam, Murugan, Komparaichakulam Vannai Kallu, Chettikulam, Mankulam, Madawachchiya, Rambawa, Mihintala, Dambulla and reached Matale on the eighth day. They camped that night at the Matale Muthumariamman temple and the next night at the Kandy Pillayar temple. They reached Gampola on the tenth day.

Karuppaiah had enjoyed the trip immensely. Later in life, he related stories of that adventure.....How a woman fell ill and had to be carried over 16 kilometres to an ambalama before a doctor could treat her. He recalled the rough voyage where almost all but he became violently sick. He laughed heartily, remembering how they ran when they saw a herd of wild elephants and fled.

In Gampola they went straight to Muthaiah's shop. He received them with affection asking them to stay the night. They could start for Maruthappan's estate the next morning.

He wanted Karuppaiah to be with him. "I want to train you in business", Muthaiah said.

Karuppaiah did not like that idea. He wanted to go with the others to the estate. But Muthaiah insisted he had to stay. He could go to the estates in his bullock cart with his wares.

"You will be going to many estates, not one", Muthaiah said.

Karuppaiah fell for that bait. He knew that he had to obey Muthaiah in any case. He was a distant relative.

Muthaiah, however did not treat him as a relative. He was harsh. He made him work long hours. He used him as a servant. Karuppaiah had to keep awake till Muthaiah returned from his shop. He was assaulted if he was found to have fallen asleep. Karuppaiah finally solved that problem by sleeping at the front door, waking at the first knock. This earned him Muthaiah's goodwill and he was promoted to a sales boy in the shop.

It was Muthaiah who gave the name Karuppaiah to Thondaman's father. His parents had named him Kumaravel, but Muthaiah did not care for the name. "From today I will call you Karuppan", Muthaiah ordered one day and Karuppan he was called thereafter. As he grew up and began trading the name became Karuppaiah Pillai. The 'Pillai' part of the name earned him creditworthiness.

How long Karuppaiah worked with Muthaiah is not clear. The exact dates or even years of Karuppaiah's life are obscure. Even the year of his birth and the year he migrated to Ceylon can only be determined by external evidence. But the exact dates and years are not important to this story.

When Karuppaiah left Muthaiah's service he joined Gordon Estate in Kadugannawa at a daily wage of 13 cents. It could have been the year 1875.

That was the time of the coffee boom. Coffee had been planted since the 1830 and in 1861 Ceylon exported a record crop. Gordon Estate had also planted coffee and was doing well financially. That gave Karuppaiah an

opening. He rounded up a 'gang' of workers and became its chief, a kankani.

The kankani played an important role in the estate administrative system. He ensured the attendance of the workers in his 'gang', supervised them, calculated their wages, supplied their essential commodities and looked after their welfare. The kankani also served as the link between the estate superintendent and labour.

There are many stories about Karuppaiah during this period. He was a handsome man, with a pleasant disposition. He was strict, but humane. It was said he once found that a woman picker in his 'gang' was unable to get her minimum daily poundage. He found that she was ill and persuaded the other pluckers to give her a handful of their pickings so that she could fulfil the minimum requirement. By such humane qualities he won the hearts of the labourers. He won friends in all walks of life and he also had reputation of being a 'ladies' man. He was said to have raised a family when at Gordon Estate.

The deadly coffee blight, which first appeared in 1869, spread to Gordon Estate around 1879. By the next year, it had destroyed the entire plantation. Karuppaiah lost his job and joined Attabage Estate. It was his worst period. He was almost a broken man.

The turnaround came ten years later. He decided to quit the place of continued misfortune and go elsewhere. He chose Nuwara Eliya and set out on his journey.

A barber crossed his path. People consider the barber an ill omen; but the barber observing Karuppaiah's dejected mien asked him where he was going.

"I'm going to Nuwara Eliya to find a job", Karuppaiah replied.

"Dorai, I heard that they were looking for a good kankani at Wavendon Estate, in Ramboda", the barber told him.

Karuppaiah went there and got the job. So the barber had turned out to be a good omen after all. That happened in 1890. From then it was a meteoric rise. He soon became a head kankani in charge of the labour of seven estates in the Ramboda range including Dunnasi-

nine. He got up at 4 a.m. every day, walked all the estates to check the labour turn-out and supervise the work of the sub-kankanis. He returned to his room at 7 p.m. exhausted.

His hard work was well rewarded. He collected a big packet of 'pence money' — four cents per worker every day. That money he invested in diverse ventures. He bought bullock carts and organised a retail business of household goods, he started a 'transport agency' under the name V.E.K.R. to carry tea caskets to Colombo and bring back groceries; he also ran a freight forwarding agency. And he did not neglect the traditional side-line of money lending.

While busy making money he also became involved with a woman named Kathirayi. He married her and had children by her; but his people at Muna Pudur refused to recognise the marriage. He was ordered to marry from his own Kallar caste. Kathirayi was of a different stock. Karuppaiah finally consented and married Sithammal, Thondaman's mother. That was in 1903.

Karuppaiah's marriage was a big event in the village. Dressed like a king, the bridegroom rode a white horse, specially hired, to the bride's house. The couple returned to the bridegroom's house in a richly decorated horse-drawn cart. It was a glamorous event. The people of the area talked about it for years.

The eldest child was a daughter. Thirumal, born in 1905. The child died. But it was after her birth that Karuppaiah bought Wavendon Estate, and became the first native to own an estate in the Nuwara Eliya district. Thirumal, he believed, had brought him luck.

Wavendon Estate was the property of an absentee owner. Miss Owen, who lived in England. Karuppaiah, who by then had amassed considerable wealth, bought it in 1909 for Rs. 75,000. It was a large tract of land reaching up to the high hill tops where Protoft and Poojagoda estates are now situated. At that time only a small extent of land was under cultivation. Coffee was being gradually abandoned and tea was only beginning. The bulk of the land was uncultivated.

A year after he bought Wavendon, Karuppaiah returned to Muna Pudur and stayed four years. He built

a platial house, complete with audience hall. to fulfil the vow he took the day he left for Ceylon. He wanted to restore the 'family glory.'

Four children were born in those years at Muna Pudur — three girls and the youngest a son, born on August 30, 1913. That boy was Savumiamoorthy, whom his mother fondly called Mathavan; and Mathavan he was in his young days, in school and everywhere. It was only when he travelled to Ceylon that his birth name was unearthed and he was known by that name Savumiamoorthy during his first eight years in Ceylon. It was after his marriage that he took the clan name Thondaman — the clan that ruled parts of Ramnad district and had established links with Jaffna. Only one of his sisters survived: Adhiladsmi.

Karuppaiah returned to Wavendon soon after Thondaman's birth and did not go back to his village for seven years. He planted tea in the entire estate. He also acquired the Tawalakanda division and planted tea there too. He also concentrated on trade and transport. In those seven years Karuppaiah built himself up into a rich and influential planter-trader.

Thondaman was seven years old when his father returned again to Muna Pudur. He had grown into sturdy, mischievous boy and was attending a local Tamil school, founded a few years earlier. Father and son developed a strong attachment. When Karuppaiah prepared to return to Wavendon, Thondaman clung to him.

Karuppaiah wanted to take Thondaman with him to Ceylon, but Sithamai, the mother, would not agree. He was too young, she pleaded.— She also had misgivings about Karuppaiah's wife in Ceylon, Kathirayi, and her people. She feared they might harm the boy.

On the day Karuppaiah left for Ceylon he asked Thondaman what present he wanted.

"I want to study", Thondaman said.

"I'll call for you after I go and send you to a good school" the father promised.

It took four more years for that call to come. That memorable journey changed the course of Thondaman's life, that of his family, the history of the Indian Tamils of Ceylon and of Ceylon itself.

CHAPTER 2

THE WELCOME SPEECH

Thondaman came to Ceylon shortly after his eleventh birthday, in 1924. It was an emotional experience. He was parting from his mother who had clung to him all these years, to join a father whose affection he had experienced only briefly. He was leaving the somewhat arid, warm, rice-farming environment that was his home, for a humid, hilly plantation. But he was not afraid. He was a boy and he was delighted. It was an exciting moment when he received the quarantine form from his father. That would enable him to travel without being detained for a week at Mandapam camp. It was the first document that bore the name Savumiamoorthy. And so was he called until he took his clan name in 1932, soon after his marriage.

It was after the Dipawali festival that Thondaman left his native village Muna Pudur for Ceylon. He travelled by train to Dhanuskodi, accompanied by a relative and crossed the Gulf of Mannar by a steamer. From Mannar he took train to Polgahawela from where he travelled by the Badulla train to Gampola. His father, Karuppaiah, was at the station to receive him.

From Gampola he was driven by car to Ramboda, seated at the rear with his father. It was his father's car, bought from a British planter. The steep and winding roads made Thondaman feel giddy. Suddenly, he vomited.

His father was annoyed. He shouted at the driver to stop. He scolded Thondaman: "You have dirtied the car. I bought it from a white 'dora!'." His admiration and respect for the white man was reflected in the way he uttered the word 'dora!'.

Ramboda fascinated Thondaman. He roamed the hills, bathed in the rivers and waterfalls, walked with his father from division to division, admiring the manicured green carpet of tea. It was a novel experience and he enjoyed it thoroughly. He got the feel of the place and got to know the basics of his father's work.

A few weeks after acclimatisation, Thondaman was admitted to the 'estate school' at Wavendon. It was a room behind the estate office, where the children of the estate staff and kankanis were gathered daily. The head clerk was the teacher. In between his normal work and whenever he found time, he taught them to read, write and add. Thondaman went to that estate school for three years.

Karuppalah's influence had spread far and wide in the Nuwara Eliya district. He did business with leading Colombo firms and the 'white dorais' on other estates, and with government offices. He realised that his ignorance of the English language was a great handicap. His son should not suffer such a difficulty. He decided to admit Thondaman to St. Andrew's College, Gampola.

There were two problems. First, Thondaman was overage; he was 14. Secondly, the college insisted on a minimum qualification for admission: a pass in the third standard. An exemption was allowed only if a student brought a certificate of competence from a recognised school teacher. Thondaman was sent to one such teacher who coached him in three months.

Thondaman was at St. Andrew's for five years, from 1927 to 1932. At the start he travelled daily from Ramboda by car, with his cousin Mathavan. Karuppalah decided it would be better if the two boys resided at Gampola. The time they spent daily on the roads could be gainfully used. So he started a business at Gampola but it failed. He lost a fortune in that venture.

Every Friday Thondaman went to Wavendon and returned to Gampola on Monday morning. He travelled up and down in the lorries that plied regularly on the Nuwara Eliya road. During the days he was at Wavendon he worked with his father.

One of his duties was to go through the accounts. The day's account had to be balanced before he was permitted to go to bed. Thondaman learnt his accounting from his father, the hard way. One night, then he was 17 years old, Thondaman went through the day's accounts at Wavendon and found a cash shortage of one cent.

"Go through it again and find how that happened," his father thundered. He went through it again. The shortfall remained. He had to go through the whole mass of figures a third time to discover the source of that shortfall.

As boys always do, Thondaman soon mastered the art of managing such situations. He carried a few cents with him and when a slight shortfall occurred slipped his own money into the cash box!

This training ingrained in Thondaman the habit of being careful with money. In 1950, when he was a member of the first parliament, he entered a London hospital for a throat operation. The operation was over and the doctors had warned him not to talk. A nurse announced that there was a telephone call from Colombo. It was from his wife, Kothai. It was difficult to get overseas calls in those days, so Thondaman decided to answer the call. He told his wife to be brief and asked her to hand over the receiver to others who had gathered there. He talked in those three minutes to seven people, including the President of the Ceylon Indian Congress, S. Rajalingam!

Thondaman was also trained by his father to be very careful about investments and never to take anything that was not his due. In the London hospital, during the time of his throat operation, he also got his eyes examined. The doctor prescribed a pair of spectacles and ordered them under Britain's National Health Scheme. Thondaman declined to accept it and bought outside for 10 pounds.

After his discharge from the hospital he bought himself three pairs of waterproof shoes. When the British press asked him why he told them: "These shoes are very costly in my country. I bought them to walk about my estates."

One day, while he was chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, Thondaman told me that some public corporations and government departments did not maintain proper accounts and millions of rupees went unaccounted. "Every time I notice such things I think of the sleepless hours I spent tracing that one cent", he said.

It was in 1927, the year Thondaman joined St. Andrew's, that Mahatma Gandhi visited Ceylon. The visit was organised by the Nagarathar Society of Colombo an organisation of the Nattukottai Chettiars, at that time a powerful financial community. Mahatma Gandhi addressed meetings in Colombo, Kandy and Jaffna. Thondaman was at school and did not attend any of them. But he read all the Mahatma's speeches in the Tamil papers.

Thondaman had been drawn to Mahatma Gandhi even when he was a boy at Muna Pudur. His teacher there was a follower and at family gatherings Gandhi was the main subject of conversation. The Tamil papers in Tamil Nadu were full of stories about him and Thondaman devoured them all. Even after coming to Ceylon he got the papers down from India.

Gandhiji's message of non-violence and stright and simple living impressed the young Thondaman. He was particularly struck by what Gandhiji had said on November 13 at the Gintupitiya Hall: "You who are traders in this rich country are bound to be truthful, straight and friendly with the local people. The people here are going to form their opinion of the millions of Indians from the manner you deal with them. So your behaviour should be fair and free of fault.

Thondaman was impressed also by the Kandy speech in which Gandhiji had appealed to the 'great planters' to consider themselves the trustees not only of the body but the soul of their labourers, and asked them to take a personal interest in the lives of their workers.

And he was deeply influenced by the Baghavad Geetha, its concept of doing one's duty even if it meant destroying one's own relatives and friends, as preached by Lord Krishna to Arjuna. His life, his character and later the struggles he led were moulded by these historic and legendary characters: Gandhiji and Lord Krishna.

The Indian independence movement was gathering momentum and the Indian stalwarts, Jawaharlal Nehru Rajaji, Kamaraj, Moulana Abdul Kalam Azad, Vallabai Patel captured the imagination of the young man as they did so many millions like him. He got the sister to post him the Tamil papers published in Karaikudi and kept track of the sweep of events in India. He was in high demand in school and many students sought him out to borrow those papers. Discussing Indian politics was not taboo at St. Andrew's although teachers frowned upon students who talked about local happenings. It was at that time Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar and Rabindranath Tagore visited Ceylon. Thondaman was attracted by their speeches.

Karuppaiah never suspected Thondaman's inclinations. He had different ideas for his son. In 1930 he fell sick often. He began to feel he could not endure the strenuous daily routine much longer. He decided his son should marry and take over the management of the family estates and business ventures. After all, he, Karuppaiah, had reached the age of seventy and Thondaman had grown into a sturdy youth.

Thondaman's was an arranged marriage — arranged by his mother Sithammai and his sister Adhilakshmy. They chose Kothai, a fair and dainty girl, daughter of a respectable family from the adjoining village, Kandanamanikkam.

In keeping with tradition, Thondaman's sister tied the 'thali' round Kothai's neck; and thus Kothai became the wife of an absentee husband. The marriage took place in 1932. Thondaman was with his wife in Muna Pudur for a little over a year. In that time, 1933, his only son, Ramanathan, was born.

Thondaman returned to Wavendon in 1933, leaving his wife and son behind in Muna Pudur. At Wavendon, a massive task awaited him. His father's health was failing. Thondaman spent most of his time managing the estate and the business. He also travelled twice to Muna Pudur to be with his wife and son. These were also the years when he was steadily drawn into politics.

There was, at that time, an organization named the Gandhi Seva Sangam in Hatton. Youths like Rajalingam and Vellayan were active members. They once

approached Thondaman, a rich youth with Gandhian leanings, to attend their meetings. Thondaman was reluctant, but persuaded by the affable Rajalingam to attend. He knew he would wound his father's feelings, if he dabbled in politics. Karuppaiah was adamant that his son should keep out of politics. So the invitation was accepted in stealth.

A resolution was passed at that meeting calling upon the government to take steps to alleviate the hardships of immigrant labourers.

There was yet another organisation, called the Bose Sangam, formed by the supporters of Subas Chandra Bose. Thondaman attended some of its meetings too.

Late in 1938, Karuppaiah fell seriously ill. He was confined to his room. Early every morning, an employee had to read the Tamil papers to him and Thondaman had to ask him not to read out the reports of his speeches. He knew his father would be pained that his heir was dabbling in politics.

By 1939, Karuppaiah's health deteriorated further. He wished to have his daughter-in-law Kothai and grandson Ramanathan with him. They were brought to Lanka early in 1939.

Karuppaiah died in 1940. That was also the year, Thondaman was elected chairman of the Gampola branch of the Ceylon Indian Congress. Two friends D. Ramanujam and K. Subbalah had called at his Wavendon home one evening. They told him they wanted to form a branch of the Ceylon Indian Congress at Gampola and invited him to be present. At the meeting Thondaman was proposed for chairman.

It came a shock to him. He was hesitant; but Ramanujam pressed him to accept it. Thondaman asked for time. He told them he wanted to consult elders. The next morning he went to Kandy and met with P. Rajapriyar, a leading social worker and a family friend.

Rajapriyar told him: "Young man, take it.....some of us fight to get such positions.....we go after such jobs.....you are being offered it on a plate. Take it". Thondaman did so.

"That was one of the most difficult decision I had to take in my life", Thondaman now recalls. It was difficult because I was being pulled in opposite directions". At one end was the influence of his father who insisted that politics was strictly for the masters, the British.

At the other was his natural concern for the welfare of the workers. His interest in the downtrodden came from his mother, who was always kind to the poor and the sick and had got Thondaman to feed them whenever poor men visited their house at Muna Pudur. His interest in politics he inherited from his clan, many of whom joined Mahatma Gandhi's independence struggle.

Thondaman became aware of the abject poverty in which the Indian Tamil labour lived only after he came to Wavendon. He was not permitted to visit the line rooms and was strictly forbidden to play with the labourers' children. The estate school he studied for the first three years was not open to the children of labourers.

During the five years he studied at St. Andrew's, he learnt more about the problems of Indian immigrants in Ceylon and the Indian independence struggle. The boys used to exchange the Tamil newspapers and magazines they got from India and one day his friend gave him a paper with a poem by Kavignar Bharathi. Thondaman was so moved by it he memorised it. He recited it to his friends. Mahatma Gandhi's visit in 1927 and the elections to the State Council in 1931 fuelled Thondaman's interest in politics.

The 1931 election was the first in Sri Lanka under adult franchise, introduced under the Donoughmore Constitution. Two Indian Tamils won seats in that election: S. P. Vythilingam at Talawakelle and Peri Sundaram at Hatton. On the votes of Tamil plantation workers a European planter, A. Gordon Fellows, was elected to the Bandarawela seat.

Thondaman did not play any active part in that election, though he followed it with interest. It gave him the opportunity to acquaint himself with the historical development of Indian representation in Ceylon's legislature. Ceylon had become a Crown colony in 1802 and a legislative council of sixteen members was established in 1833, on the recommendation of the Colebrook Commission. Of these members nine were officials and six non-

officials, comprising three Europeans one Sinhalese, one Tamil and one Burgher. The council had no financial power.

The Planters' Association which was started in the 1830s and the merchants wanted a bigger share in the country's administration, so that they could prod the executive to build roads and railways linking the estates to Colombo. It was they who agitated for a non-official majority and for financial power to the legislative council. In 1848 and 1855 they demanded that the number of non-official members be increased because they were dissatisfied with the appropriation granted for the construction and maintenance of roads.

In 1859 they revived the demand, angered at the collapse of government plans to build the railway from Colombo to Kandy. This led Sir Arthur Gordon to add a Kandyan and a Muslim to the unofficial members, making eight in all. The number of official members was also raised from 9 to 11.

It was around 1900 that the middle-class which had emerged in the island last quarter of the nineteenth century, began to assert itself. The political awakening that had swept India was the motive force. The new Ceylonese nationalism began to agitate for political reform. This resulted in the strengthening of non-official members in the council and in 1912, the introduction of the elective principle.

The legislative council was expanded to 21 members, eleven of whom were officials, the balance ten non-officials. Four of them were elected: European urban, European rural, Burgher and Educated Ceylonese. The Educated Ceylonese member was Sir Ponnambalam.

It was the legislative council of 1924 that made provision for the first time for Indian Tamil representation. The council, which consisted of 12 official members and 37 unofficial members had 23 elected on a territorial basis and eleven on a communal basis. Of the eleven communal representations Europeans had three (urban, rural and commercial) the Western Province Ceylon Tamils one, Burghers 2, Indians 2 and Muslims 3.

The franchise was confined to make British subjects aged 21 years, able to read and write English, Sinhalese

or Tamil; who had resided in the electoral district and who enjoyed a clear annual income of not less than Rs. 600, or had other property qualifications.

This restricted the franchise to about 4% of the people. The actual number of voters in the country were 205, 081, of which only 12,901 were Indian Tamils. Most of them were kankanis and other minor estate staff.

Ignatius Xavier Pereira and S. K. Natesa Iyer were the two Indian representatives. Natesa Iyer had been in the legislature council earlier too. He succeeded S. R. Mohamed Sultan, the fresh Indian nominated to the legislature council of 1920. Sultan died a year later.

The plight of the Indian Tamil labour was first highlighted in 1913 by Ponnambalam Arunachalam younger brother of Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan. Unlike Ramanathan, who referred derogatively to the Indian Tamil immigrants as "Tamil estate coolies, Arunachalam launched a campaign against the Indian labour ordinances which, he said, were the main cause of the workers' low wages and poor living conditions. In 1916 he argued that the poor and ignorant workers should be protected from the "cupidity and tyranny of unscrupulous recruiters and bad employers".

Earlier ordinances enacted by the British-Indian government were intended to facilitate the hire and retention of workers by the planters. Even the ordinance of 1865, a consolidation of a series of ordinances beginning in 1841 and ending in 1863, were intended to keep the labourer tied in debt to the kankani and the estate.

These ordinances failed to stop labourers bolting from one estate and joining another, or kankanis transferring their gangs. From 1865 a series of ordinances were proclaimed to end this practice. The result was the infamous Tundu System, originally known as the Tin Ticket System.

Under the Tin Ticket System, introduced in 1889, the coolies who were brought from India were first taken to a camp at Ragama and each of them issued a tin ticket stamped with consecutive individual numbers, the estate number and the district letter. They were then sent by train to the station nearest the estate and the transport

charge was collected from the estate through the kachcheri.

To the kankanis who went to the coast of Mannar to receive the labourers, tin tickets were issued in bulk. The individual numbers stamped on the tin tickets were entered in the check roll against the name of each worker.

The Tin Ticket System introduced a new type of servitude which Arunachalam opposed. The emergence of Indian nationalism at the same time exerted pressure on the British-Indian government to safeguard the interests of emigrant labour. The result was the enactment of the Indian Immigration Labour Ordinance in 1923, which abolished the Tin Ticket System and the Minimum Wages (Indian) Labour Ordinance in 1927, which fixed the minimum wage.

It was at this time and in this setting that K. Natesa Iyer, a Tanjore Brahmin who worked as a government clerk in Madras and was brought to Ceylon in 1920 to edit a Tamil newspaper, Thesa Nesan, published by Arunachalam and Dr. E. V. Ratnam, both executive members of the Ceylon National Congress created a stir. Natesa Iyer joined A. E. Goonesinghe's Ceylon Labour Union and quickly rose to be its vice-president.

A large number of Malayalis and Indian Tamils were working then Colombo harbour and other government and private undertakings in the capital. Natesa Iyer, a powerful Tamil orator, brought them under the Ceylon Labour Union. From 1925 he took an interest in Indian plantation labour and wanted to organise them under the Ceylon Labour Union. Being watched by the police who branded him a communist and an agitator, he visited the estates dressed as a cloth merchant.

In the legislative council he agitated for better working conditions for harbour, industrial and plantation workers. Outside he urged plantation workers to join Goonesinghe's union. He played an important role in the 1927 harbour strike, where he led Indian immigrant labour. When the government brought blacklegs from India, Natesa Iyer persuaded them not to work.

But Natesa Iyer realised, in dismay and disappointment that Goonesinghe was swiftly sliding into the Sinhala Maha Sabha founded by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, which was emerging as an alternative to the Ceylon National

Congress—from which platform Arunachalam, the Senanayake brothers (F.R. and D.S.) and Razik Fareed were agitating for political reforms.

Natesa Iyer quit the Ceylon Labour Union in 1928, disgusted by Goonesinghe's anti-Indian campaign. Goonesinghe blamed the Indians for all the country's ills. He blamed them for the growing unemployment among the educated Sinhalese. He overlooked or ignored the actual causes: the global economic recession and the failure of the colonial government to create new opportunities of employment. Goonesinghe prescribed a short cut solution: "Deport the Indians".

From then on Natesa Iyer devoted himself to the cause of estate labour. He formed the All Ceylon Estate Labour Federation, with the headquarters in Hatton. He launched a short-lived English language journal, "The Indian Estate Labourer", and published many pamphlets espousing this cause.

He failed to make much progress because he adopted an urban approach to a purely plantation problem. He also failed to identify himself with the life of the estate worker because his own background was completely different. He could only identify himself with the estate worker intellectually.

Besides, the Indian community failed to realise the strength of the emerging Sinhala communalism till the closing years of the thirties. The introduction of universal franchise and the evolution of the system of majority rule since 1931 had concentrated power in Sinhala leadership.

The first State Council was constituted in July 7, 1931 under the Donoughmore constitution. There were 61 members, of whom 50 were elected on a territorial basis, six were nominated by the Governor and three were officials. Peri Sunderam was elected uncontested for Hatton and he became the Minister of Labour, Industry and Commerce. He was the first Indian Tamil to be a Minister. S. P. Vytilingam won the Talawakelle seat and I. X. Pereira was nominated.

The members in the state council were divided among seven executive committees, headed by a member who was

designated the minister. The seven ministers formed the Board of Ministers and its head, was called the Leader of the State Council.

The first State Council was dissolved on December 7, 1935. The second was inaugurated on March 17, 1935 and continued till June 4, 1947. Natesa Iyer contested Hatton and Peri Sunderam declined to stand for election, calling Natesa Iyer 'an upstart'. Natesa Iyer won easily. J. G. Rajakulendran won Bandarawela and Vytilingam Talawakelle. Pereira was nominated again.

That was the political and trade union setting in which the Ceylon India Congress was born. Actually, two different sets of circumstances led to the CIC's emergence. The first was what has been termed the 'Chetty crisis'. Nattukottai chettiers who had migrated to Ceylon since the 1920s had carried on the business of banking till the British banks were established in the 1840s.

The Chettiyars then changed their role to that of middle men. They borrowed from the banks and lent to planters and businessmen at a slightly higher rate. This arrangement went on till 1925, when a Nattukottai chettiar firm collapsed. This led to the exposure of many malpractices by Nattukottai chettiar firms and the banks immediately stopped lending them money.

To get over the sudden scarcity of cash, the chettiar firms demanded repayment of their loans from their Ceylonese clients. The Ceylonese borrowers were themselves in financial straits owing to the global economic depression and thus defaulted payment. The chettiers put the promissory notes in suit and foreclosed their mortgages. The period 1930-36 was full of such cases. This resulted in an intense anti-chettiar campaign which created a sense of uncertainty in that community. The Nattukottai Chettiyar Sangam, which was formed many years ago, suddenly set up and took notice.

The anti-Indianism surfacing at this time took many forms and directions. There was an outcry against toddy and arrack renters. Thus came about the Baratha Youth Association. Then there was an agitation to send back Malayalee harbour workers, government servants and even sanitary workers. There was also a boycott campaign against Indian retail shops and Jaffna cigars.

There was a general atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety among Indian migrants, which led to the proliferation of various associations intended to protect their interests.

The most prominent and influential of all the Indian associations was the India Seva Sangam, with the leading businessman Valliappa Chettiar as president. Abdul Aziz a young graduate from Bombay who had migrated to Lanka in the early thirties, was its secretary. Other leading members were S. Sangaralingam Pillai, P. T. Thanu Pillai, I. X. Pereira, Peri Sundaram, V. R. M. Subramaniam Chettiar, H. Nelliah Pillai and S. P. Vytilingam.

Since the anti-Indian campaign of Goonesinghe and the Sinhala Maha Sabhas' was catching up, an attempt was made to bring all the Indian associations together. A few joint meetings were held from time to time to consider the question of the rights of people of Indian origin.

These meetings produced two divergent views. The older generation wanted to co-operate with the British colonial rulers and get safeguards from them. The youths wanted to go along with the Gandhian struggle and urged co-operation with the emerging Ceylonese nationalistic forces.

Both these groups agreed that they must rope in the plantation workers. That was because the plantation workers formed the bulk of the Indian community and constituted the most powerful sector.

Two important events took place at this time. Goonasinghe, who had won the 1939 State Council election on a communal platform, got the council to pass a resolution calling for the deportation of 15,000 Indians, despite strong opposition from the Tamil members. The next was the decision of the State Council in 1939 to deport all Indians appointed to government service after April 1, 1934, and to discontinue all Indians with less than ten years' service. The resolution was moved by D. S. Senanayake.

Those two incidents jolted the Indian community in Ceylon. They realised the danger they faced. A special

meeting of all the Indian associations was summoned. It passed two resolutions. The first condemned the deportation move by the State Council. The second authorised the working committee to take up the matter with the Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi.

Moving both resolutions from the chair, Valliappa Chettiar said: "We have ignored the anti-Indian propaganda for long. Now, things have gone too far. We must act now or we will be the losers. We must get the Indian National Congress to intervene on our behalf."

A two-member delegation was sent immediately to meet Gandhiji. Vytilingam and Pereira were chosen for that purpose. They met Gandhiji in Delhi and briefed him. He sent Jawaharlal Nehru as his special emissary to talk with the Ceylonese. Nehru arrived in Colombo on July 18. He met the Leader of the State Council D. S. Senanayake and some Ministers. They took an uncompromising stand. Senanayake told Nehru that many educated Ceylonese were unemployed and they would revolt if foreigners were allowed to rob them of their jobs. All efforts at persuasion failed.

Nehru also met all the Indian organisation, separately and jointly. He advised them to unite if they were to preserve their rights and privileges. He reiterated this message at every meeting.

The Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam gave Nehru a reception on July 22. In replying to the welcome speech Nehru made an impressed plea for unity. He said: "I see only one way out of the crisis. That is unity. You must all get together under one flag. You must form a single organisation, like the Indian National Congress".

He spelled out a four-point program of action. All Indians living in Colombo should unite. The different organisations in Colombo should weld into a single organisation. The plantation workers and others outside Colombo should also be brought under the single organisation. That unified organisation should voice the problems of the Indian Tamils

Nehru found, to his surprise, that it was difficult to bring these organisations together. No one was prepared to sacrifice his position or power. After much persuasion,

the organisations agreed to give unity a try. The negotiations started at nine o'clock on July 24, 1939.

It was a very long meeting. They argued over everything. The elders suggested the united association should be named the Ceylon Indian Central Association. The youths wanted it to be called the Ceylon-Indian National Congress. There were already two organisations so named.

They also quarrelled over the membership of the interim committee. It was around 10 p.m. and Nehru was getting sick of the whole thing. "I am tired", he said. "I want to go and sleep for some time. Before I go I wish to place my suggestion for your consideration. Please consider it and if you reach an agreement wake me up."

He gave them a five-point formula. It was that the Ceylon Indian Central Association and the Ceylon Indian National Congress should be dissolved. An interim committee of 18 people should be elected. Of them one would be chairman, two deputy chairmen, and one a treasurer. The balance membership of 14 would be divided equally between the two organisations. This 18-member committee would co-opt seven members from the other associations. This 25-member committee would function as the executive committee of the new organisation, to be named the Ceylon Indian Congress.

After a three-hour debate, the delegates decided to accept the Nehru formula. They woke him up at 1.20 a.m. on July 25, 1939. All delegates present at that early morning session signed a declaration setting up the Ceylon Indian Congress. Nehru signed that document as a witness and a guarantor.

The committee met the same day and elected V. R. M. V. A. Lakshmanan Chettiar — a 'neutral' — as president, and H. M. Desai and Aziz as joint secretaries. The constitution of the organisation was drawn up that day under the guidance of Nehru and it was agreed that district committees should be set up immediately and the first session held in September.

Next evening, July 26, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, then a common organisation of all Marxists, arranged a public rally at Galle Face green. Nehru was invited to address that meeting on the Indian independence struggle

and about the talks he had had with the Ceylon government on the Indian Tamil problem. Nehru delivered a violent speech and Dr. Colvin R. de Silva interpreted it into Sinhalese. A. E. Goonesinghe's thugs started hooting and tried to disrupt the meeting. Nehru got angry and attempted to jump into the crowd to chase the disrupters. Colvin held him tight and prevented him from getting into the crowd.

Nehru wanted the CIC to form district committees in all the major towns in the plantation areas. He set August as the deadline. The CIC took immediate action to form district committees in Badulla, Hatton, Balangoda, Nuwara Eliya, Matale and Gampola. Thondaman was elected the head of the Gampola district committee. That was Thondaman's first direct involvement in politics. He attended that meeting without the knowledge of his father.

While the Indian leaders were busy organising the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC) Goonesinghe and his supporters were making things very hot for the Indian Tamils. Goonesinghe had captured the secretaryship of the Sinhala Maha Sabha, and his anti-Indian campaign was becoming more vigorous and vindictive.

The government served notice to discontinue the services of 800 Indians in Colombo. The government issued a circular instructing the heads of government departments not to recruit Indians. The Galle Urban Council passed a resolution calling on the government not to employ Indians.

At the instance of Gandhiji and Nehru, the Indian National Congress passed a resolution criticising Lanka's bid to deport the Indians. The Ceylon Indian Congress followed suit.

India retaliated in 1939 by imposing a ban on labour emigration to Lanka. This ban was a watershed in the history of Indo-Lanka relations and in the history of the Indian immigrants. People who had been moving freely between the two countries for over a century, were suddenly told to decide to make either India or Lanka their home. A vast majority chose Lanka.

The CIC executive committee was not very active. Lakshmanan Chettiar was busy contesting the Puthukottai seat in the Madras State assembly election. He had

been a member of that electorate earlier too, and had won the 1939 August election with a convincing majority.

Initial enthusiasm in the new CIC had ebbed. There was not enough enthusiasm among the district committees to host the inaugural convention. No one had the necessary financial backing to undertake that massive task.

The Gampola district committee was worried. K. Rajalingam, its secretary, called on Thondaman at Wavendon one evening in July 1940, with D. Ramanujam and Subbaiah. Ramanujam broached the topic apologetically, "One year has passed since the CIC was formed. Nehruji wanted the inaugural sessions to be held not later than September last year. The leadership is anxious to have it in the hill country. But no district committee is willing to host the sessions", he said.

"Why?" Thondaman asked.

"They say they don't have the money", Subbaiah interjected.

Thondaman thought for a while and asked: "Shall we host it?"

Rajalingam asked: "How are we to find the money?"

"We will try and collect some", Thondaman said.

A week later the Gampola district committee met. Besides the four who met at Wavendon, the others present were S. Chokalinam Chettiar, treasurer, S. Somasundaram, S. G. Samson, V. Sathappa Chettiyar, J. Samuvel, V. Annamalai, M. Ramasubramaniam, S. K. R. Ramalingam, S. Charles and V. Murugappah.

The committee decided to host the inaugural sessions and resolved to set up a reception committee to make the arrangements. They asked Thondaman to head it.

Thondaman, Rajalingam and Ramanujam, went to Colombo to meet the CIC president, Lakshmanan Chettiar and inform him of their decision to host the inaugural session. Chettiar told them there was a move to hold it in Badulla and Aziz was organising it. Thondaman

assured Chettiar that they would make the inauguration a big show and won his consent.

It was, in fact, a big show. It was held on September 7 and 8 in Gampola town in a huge enclosure named 'Nehru Nagar'. They also organised a carnival. Over a lakh of people attended the public meeting. Two guests were invited from Madras.

One was V. V. Giri, then a labour leader, the other was S. Sathiyamoorthy, a respected Indian National Congress leader and a masterly orator.

Thondaman delivered the welcome speech. It was his first major speech. He had only addressed small gatherings before. But that day there were thousands present and Sathiyamoorthy was on stage. Thondaman was nervous but as he started to speak some inner force impelled him. He spoke with force and conviction.

First he explained why the Indian immigrants had failed to organise themselves earlier. "We felt there was no necessity to have a separate organisation because our relationship with the Sinhalese was very good."

Then he said the new political awareness that had emerged among the Sinhala people, following the granting of universal suffrage in 1931, had been misdirected into an anti-Indian movement. He also analysed the different discriminatory laws that had been enacted. Then he dealt with the charge that Indians always ran to India and to the Indian National Congress for support.

"Can you expect a minority community that had been subjected to repeated harassment and discrimination not to get the support of someone sympathetic?" he asked.

He then traced the circumstances in which the CIC was formed and said: "The CIC is a democratic organisation. All its members, whether rich or poor, enjoy similar rights. The CIC will not be the puppet of any rich individual or groups of individuals."

After his speech, Sathiyamoorthy went up to Thondaman and congratulated him. "Keep it up young man", he said.

Thondaman kept it up and grew into a political leader.

CHAPTER 3

THE SATYAGRAHA

In a recent interview, Thondaman described the two decades of the forties and fifties as the "years of mistakes". He said: "When I look back, I feel those twenty years caused all the miseries we suffered and are now trying to correct."

The tempo of anti-Indianism accelerated in 1940s. The government realised for the first time that India's ban on the emigration of labour had left in Ceylon's lap over six lakhs of Indians who had decided to settle down there. The earlier migratory habits ceased. They became permanent settlers.

This unexpected development upset the local administration. A delegation led by D. S. Senanayake and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike went to Delhi to take up the matter with the Indian Viceroy. The Ceylon Indian Congress decided that it should present its viewpoint too. A delegation was hurriedly summoned with Peri Sundaram as its leader. Other members were Desai Motha and Aziz.

At the discussions Senanayake took up the position that all Indian Tamils in Ceylon were Indian nationals and should be taken back by India. The Indian government declined to accept that position. It held that many Indians had settled in Ceylon for many years and had a right to continue to live there.

Bandaranaike said Ceylon could not afford to have more than two lakhs of Indians and the balance should be taken back by India. The Indian officials declined to accept that too.

Peri Sundaram argued that Indians with long residence had qualified to become Ceylon citizens and the choice should be left to the people.

That was the first occasion Ceylonese leaders went to Delhi seeking a solution to the Indian immigrant problem.

The rising wave of anti-Indianism prompted large numbers of Indians to join the CIC. At the time of the Gampola sessions, the membership exceeded over two lakh and the majority of them were plantation workers. This made the CIC interested in the working conditions of estate workers. When the leadership took up those matters with estate managements they took up the position that they cannot negotiate with political parties. This led to the formation of the trade union wing, called the Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union (CICLU) in September 1940 a few days after the Gampola sessions. Thondaman was elected leader and Aziz secretary.

Thondaman, though a novice, was backed by Peri Sundaram, a veteran in politics. Peri Sundaram argued that Thondaman was worth his weight in gold and had the time and money to spare for union work. He also said that Thondaman possessed an inborn quality for leadership. Peri Sundaram's group voted for Thondaman and within years Thondaman became the leader of Peri Sundaram's group.

Thondaman's first meeting with Peri Sundaram was soon after he left school. His father, Karuppalah, took him along when he called on Peri Sundaram in Colombo to discuss a business transaction. The meeting was in Peri Sundaram's study, lined with thick bound books.

That meeting produced two results: a kind of affection developed between Peri Sundaram and Thondaman; and Thondaman developed a love for books. But Thondaman never had time to read books. He once said: "I normally read the first section and the last section in any book. Then I know what is in the middle."

Like Thondaman, Aziz also had come from India to join his father. Thondaman migrated while he was young and lived and moved with the people of the estates. His education was in the context of an estate environment and he grew up an one of the plantation

people. His thinking and views were shaped by that environment.

Aziz joined his father in Colombo after getting a commerce degree at Bombay University. He joined the YMCA forum. He was more intellectually bent, theoretical and left-minded. His inclination to trace unionism was the outcome of leftist politics.

This difference in the psychology, character, environment and political thinking of these two men had an extensive impact on the fate and history of the Indian Tamils. They clashed for the presidency of the CIC in 1942, at the second sessions held in Kandy. That was also the first session of the CIC Labour Union. At the general council meeting Aziz got 31 votes to Thondaman's 19.

That was the period that the newly formed left political parties were both fashionable and influential. Their support for labour and the down-trodden won them support. The educated sections of the Indian community were also enamoured by leftist theories. These groups and the Colombo-based leadership supported Aziz.

The following years were some of the most difficult in the history of the CICLU. The War and Defence Regulation was in operation. Planters victimised workers who joined the union. Trade union officials were not admitted to the estates. Anyone who tried to enter was arrested and charged under the Criminal Trespass Ordinance. Aziz Thondaman and other leaders met the workers stealthily outside at night and enrolled them.

This led to a lot of dissatisfaction among the labourers. There were strikes all over the plantations. The unrest forced Labour Minister G. C. S. Corea to summon the CICLU and the Employers' Federation for talks. They reached an agreement dubbed the Seven-Point Agreement intended to regulate the relationship between unions and employers.

In the second half of 1942 an order was made by Geoffrey Layton Commander-in-Chief of the British armed forces and in overall control of the island to freeze the dearness allowance paid to plantation workers. The CICLU executive committee met in emergency session and directed its president, Aziz, to take up the matter

with Layton. But Layton refused the request. Aziz then wrote to him of the CICLU decision to contest the matter in court, under the defence regulations. Layton relented and ordered payment of the allowance.

Layton was not prepared to take defeat. He awaited his moment to pounce on the CICLU and Aziz. That opportunity came in March 1943. At the CICLU's second annual sessions at Badulla, Aziz attacked the government for its anti-Indianism and for neglecting estate labour. He was charged in the district court for causing disaffection against the government and obstructing the war effort. The district court committed Aziz for trial to the Supreme Court. Aziz was defended by S. Nadesan and N. Nadarajah.

Nadesan moved that Aziz be freed on bail. The court refused the application. Aziz was remanded at Welikada Prison.

Nadesan advised Aziz to ask for a Tamil-speaking jury. Nadesan, who admitted the content of the speech, argued that Aziz was entitled to his freedom of expression and freedom of speech. Aziz was acquitted by the jury, six of the seven holding him not guilty.

By this time there was complete political turmoil in South Asia. The Indian independence movement had gathered momentum. Its impact was also felt in Ceylon. There was a demand for constitutional reform. Britain sent the Soulbury Commission which arrived in Colombo in 1944. The Tamil Congress leader, G. G. Ponnambalam, was toying with his famous "50-50" demand — that 50 percent of the parliamentary seats should be reserved for the minorities.

It was at this time that the third annual sessions of the CIC was held in Hatton. Chakaravarthi Rajagopalachari ("Rajaji") was the chief guest. Ponnambalam met Rajaji to canvas the Indian leader's support for the 50-50 formula. Rajaji advised Ponnambalam to drop the demand, that it was not practicable. He also warned Ponnambalam that such solutions, even if achieved, would be merely temporary.

The CWC delegation, led by president Aziz, general secretary Vaithilingam and Thanu Pillai also had a discussion with Ponnambalam. They could not work out a

The CIC delegation submitted to the Soulbury Commission that it wanted constitutional safeguards for the citizenship and voting rights of the people of recent Indian origin. Aziz, the delegation leader, told Lord Soulbury that the CIC supported the independence demand and did not want the British to continue their rule on the pretext of safeguarding the rights of minorities.

Many Indian Tamil leaders were dissatisfied with Aziz's stand. They feared that once the British left, the Indian Tamils would be at the mercy of the chauvinistic Sinhala leadership then gaining power. Their fear was fuelled by the campaign that all Indian Tamils should be either deported or disfranchised.

Aziz argued otherwise. He said it was immoral for a party founded by Nehru to oppose independence. He argued that the chauvinistic Sinhala forces were in the minority and that Indian Tamils should align themselves with the progressive forces of the Left and safeguard their rights by bringing in a leftist government. He also held that the Sinhala campaign was actually against the Indian merchant community, not the plantation workers. He prodded the CIC towards the Left.

Aziz failed to get any substantial guarantees from the Soulbury Commission. Ponnambalam's fifty-fifty demand was totally rejected. The Soulbury Commission in its report said: "We are not inclined to agree that the system of representation recommended by the All Ceylon Tamil Congress contains the germs of development and we do not regard it as a natural evolution from the constitution of 1921 and 1924. On the contrary, we would describe a system which purported to re-impose communal representation in the rigid form contemplated as static rather than dynamic and we should not expect to find in it seeds of a healthy and progressive advance towards parliamentary self-government".

It was in this setting that Thondaman was emerging as a factor to be reckoned with. He was elected president of the CIC and the CICLU in 1945, at the Nuwara Eliya sessions, defeating Aziz and he concentrated his energies in building up the party and the trade union. The major test for him came in 1946.

The members of 363 Indian Tamil families employed in Knagsmere Estate in Bulathkohupitiya had cleared 400

acres of forest land adjoining the estate and started cultivation. The government decided to acquire that land for estate expansion and served notice on the workers to quit. The workers appealed to the CICLU and Thondaman was informed. He advised the workers not to vacate but tell the officials that they had occupied the land for five years and had the right to live there.

The workers did exactly that. They were all arrested and charged before a special court in Kegalle. The magistrate ordered their release on bail of Rs. 1000 each. The CICLU did not have that money. Thondaman offered to pay it himself. He mortgaged his estate.

The court sentenced all the workers to three months' imprisonment. Thondaman got them to appeal to the Supreme Court. He called out the CICLU members in the Hatton, Ratnapura, Yatiyantota and Kegalle districts. The strike lasted 21 days. He also threatened to cripple the entire estate sector if the government failed to respond.

D. S. Senanayake, who also held the Ministry of Agriculture, summoned the Indian Representative in Colombo, Aney, and started negotiations. They both met the Governor, Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore and urged him to pardon all 363 workers.

On legal advice Thondaman directed all but the worker Chelvanayakam to apply for pardon. Chelvanayakam appealed against the magistrate's decision to the Supreme Court and then to the Privy Council. The Privy Council held that a squatter occupying land for a long period could not be evicted on a charge of trespass. The case cost Thondaman over Rs. 2 lakhs.

While the CICLU was strengthening its political and trade union base, the Soulbury Commission recommended independence for Ceylon.

A general election was held in 1947 to elect 95 members to the first parliament. The CIC decided to contest eight seats and won seven. Thondaman contested the Nuwara Eliya seat and won it with a 6135 majority. He polled 9386 votes, as against James Rutanam's 3251 and Lawrence Perera's 1124.

The others elected on the CIC ticket were George R. Motha (Maskeliya), K. Rajalingam (Nawalapitiya), K.

Kumaravel (Kotakella), C. V. Velupillai (Talawakelle), S. M. Subbaiah (Badulla) and D. Ramanujam (Aluthnuwara). The CIC lost the Haputale seat. Motha died two years later and Aziz won Maskeliya in the by-election in March 1950.

The United National Party (UNP), formed by the amalgamation of the Ceylon National Congress and the Sinhala Maha Sabha and led by D. S. Senanayake, won 42 seats in the 101-member parliament. Even with the support of the six nominated members, Senanayake found that he was still short of an absolute majority to form the first cabinet of independent Ceylon. He was able to win over a few of the 21 independents. Two of them were Tamils — C. Suntharalingam and C. Sittambalam. Both were made ministers.

The CIC group elected Thondaman as its leader and sat in the opposition and worked closely with the 18-member Left group (LSSP—10, BLP—5 and CP—3). Tamil Congress had 7 MPs and the Labour Party one.

The leftists could not agree on a common candidate as Leader of the Opposition. The LSSP leader, Dr. N. M. Perera, functioned unofficially as Opposition leader until the BLP, led by Dr. Colvin R. de Silva joined the LSSP, when Dr. Perera officially became Leader of the Opposition.

D. S. Senanayake, the Prime Minister, sensed the danger that lay ahead for the UNP and the Sinhala people. He realised the power of the Indian Tamil vote which, he thought, if unchecked, would bring in a leftist government in the future. He also realised the need to whittle down Tamil influence and power. He persuaded the cabinet to enact the citizenship laws.

D. S. Senanayake was also responsible for the state-aided colonisation of the northern and eastern provinces by Sinhalese settlers. He had started on it while he was Minister of Agriculture in the State Council. Parts of Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Ampara (then Kalmunai) districts were colonised. These two issues — citizenship and colonisation — were the basic causes, 'mistakes', that brought suffering to Lanka.

The Ceylon Citizenship Act was passed in 1948 and it de-citizenised almost all Indian Tamils by a provision

that only person born in Lanka prior to 15 November 1949 (the date later fixed by the minister) of a father born in Ceylon, could be recognised as a citizen.

The bill was moved by Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake and in his speech introducing it in parliament, he said every country had the right to determine the persons who would be its citizens. He argued that the Indian immigrants brought to Lanka by the British colonial rulers had no abiding interest in the country and they themselves regarded themselves as temporary residents. They had also deprived the real sons and daughters of the soil, the Kandyan Sinhalese, of their land and work.

Thondaman, leader of the CIC group, met all those arguments effectively. He said that they might have come as temporary residents, but majority of them had settled there voluntarily. Many of them had been in Lanka for two or three generations and had gone to India. "They are not temporary but permanent residents. They are more the sons and daughters of the soil than most of the Sinhalese", he thundered.

On the question of depriving the Kandyan Sinhalese of land and work, he gave a detailed analysis of the true situation. The lands that were cleared for planting coffee and later tea were forest lands that belonged to the state. "My people toiled and made the waste land productive", he argued.

Thondaman claimed that he and his people were as much Kandyan as anyone else. "It's my home", he said, "I and my family are more attached to the Kandyan land than many Kandyans."

J. R. Jayewardene who was then Finance Minister quipped: "A Kandyan Tamil".

"Yes", Thondaman said: "I'm a Kandyan Tamil".

He contested the question of loyalty also. He said the CIC had supported the independence demand as much as the UNP.

The Left parties joined the CIC in opposing the citizenship Bill. They said it was a clever attempt by the UNP to weaken the working class and prevent the Left parties from capturing power through elections.

The Tamil Congress leader, Ponnambalam, said the real purpose of the bill was to weaken the Tamil people and that it was a black day for Ceylon.

The Indian and Pakistani (Residents) Citizenship Bill was passed in 1949. It laid down the qualifications for Ceylonese citizenship. They were seven years of continued residence for a married person, from January 1, 1939; and ten years of continued residence from January 1, 1936 for unmarried persons. They were also expected to have adequate means of livelihood. Their families, normally should have been resident in Lanka and they should be capable of observing the laws of the land.

When introducing the bill in parliament, Prime Minister Senanayake said the new law would enable persons of Indian origin to gain their citizenship. But the procedural and administrative requirements were designed to prevent it. The phrase 'continuous residence' was given the strictest interpretation, thus preventing even those persons who travelled to India on a brief holiday, from acquiring citizenship. Insisting on birth certificates and other such requirements made citizenship an almost impossible goal.

During the debate in parliament Thondaman highlighted this difficulty. He challenged Dudley Senanayake to produce his grandfather's birth certificate. He said many people who migrated to Ceylon did not possess birth certificates.

Between the passage of the law depriving Indian Tamils of their citizenship and the law that prescribed requirements to gain it, an important change took place. The Tamil Congress decided to join the UNP government and that led to a split in the party. Five of the seven, led by Ponnambalam, joined the government. Ponnambalam was made Minister of Industries and Fisheries. S. J. V. Chelvanayakam and C. Vanniasingham resigned from the Tamil Congress and formed the Federal Party. Thondaman was one of the first Tamil politician to welcome the new Tamil party.

He telephoned Chelvanayakam and expressed his pleasure. Later he called on Chelvanayakam and urged that the Federal Party and the CIC should work in close collaboration. The seed of Thondaman's collaboration with the Federal Party was sown then.

Ponnambalam voted with the government for the Indian and Pakistani (Residents) Citizenship Bill, though he had earlier signed an agreement with the CIC to oppose it. Suntharalingam who had earlier voted for the disfranchising bill spoke against the second bill and resigned his portfolio. The Federal Party opposed the bill and voted against it. Cheivanayakam and Vanniasingham used their legal prowess to show how unreasonable were the qualifications set for citizenship. The leftists too, criticised the law as being too harsh.

The law allowed time for people of Indian and Pakistani origin to apply for citizenship. The CIC working committee met immediately and, after lengthy discussion, decided that no one should apply. Over 90 percent of the people of Indian origin abided by the CIC directive. They did not submit their application.

The CIC Executive Committee granted an exception to the seven MPs. They were allowed to apply for citizenship so that they could retain their seats in parliament. Thondaman made his application giving the necessary particulars to prove his claim for citizenship. The Assistant Commissioner who dealt with the application asked Thondaman to disclose all the details asked for by the special regulation. He declined to do so.

"I've proved my case. Now it is your duty to make a ruling. If it is rejected I will go to courts", Thondaman replied.

Peri Sundaram who was told of this dispute advised Thondaman to supply the details asked for.

"So I will not do that. They are asking for the details which they want to use against me. I am not prepared to furnish evidence against me", Thondaman said.

The Commissioner of Immigration to whom the matter was referred decided to grant the citizenship to Thondaman. In his letter the Commissioner told Thondaman: "Please do not adopt this non-cooperative attitude in the future".

While the CIC was busy with the boycott, a major change occurred in the national political scene. D. S.

Senanayake fell from his horse while taking his regular morning ride on Galle Face green and died the following day, March 22, 1952.

Dudley Senanayake, his son, was sworn in as the new Prime Minister, thus confirming the suspicions of S. W. R.D. Bandaranaike, who had quit the U.N.P. a few months earlier and formed his own political party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Bandaranaike broke away because he thought D. S. Senanayake was grooming his nephew, John Kotelawela, or his son as successor. The breaking point came when D. S. Senanayake had declined to appoint Bandaranaike acting Prime Minister during his visit to Australia.

To cash in on the tremendous wave of public sympathy on the death of D. S. Senanayake, Dudley called for elections which he fixed for April 28, 1952.

He adopted a virulent communal campaign to win extremist Sinhala support which, unlike the 1947 election, was being weaned away from the UNP by the newly formed SLFP. Dudley also faced a formidable challenge from the Sama Samajists and Communists who had organised the Urban working class into powerful trade unions.

Inaugurating the election campaign at Kelaniya, Dudley thundered: "The Sama Samajists and Communists are embracing the Indians as comrades.....I want to remind you that the Indian government threatened to give no rice supplies to Ceylon if the land of Knavesmere estate was not allotted to 400 Indian workers".

The Indian High Commission in Colombo immediately refuted the charge and said that India at no stage had brought the question of rice supply into those negotiations. The high commission statement said India had only expressed a desire that the rice should also be distributed to Indian estate labour.

That request stemmed from earlier practices of forgetting estate labour in food distribution. It happened again in 1972 and led to prolonged negotiations and strikes.

When the election was called the Indian Tamil community realised the plight to which they had been

reduced. The seven parliamentarians who had registered themselves as Ceylon citizens and continued to be in parliament even after the citizenship act, now found they had no chance of re-entering the legislature. As a statement of the CIC then summarised: "Only a handful of us are now allowed to exercise citizenship".

After prolonged discussions, the CIC decided to launch a satyagraha. An action committee headed by Thondaman was set up for that purpose. The Badulla sessions held in the third week of April decided to launch the campaign from Monday, April 28. The CIC issued a statement to that effect at the conclusion of the Badulla sessions.

The statement said that through the satyagraha the CIC sought to "appeal to the country's conscience". It made it clear that in the movement..... "There is and can be no trace of intimation or villification of the government or any section of the people".

Their reason for the satyagraha decision, the statement said, was that the status of the Indian Tamils had been under negotiation for a long period of time and all avenues of approach had been explored. It had been discussed between the CIC and the Ceylon government and even between the Ceylon and Indian governments. But there were no signs of settlement. The situation had, in fact, deteriorated.

The CIC had already filed a legal suit challenging the validity of the citizenship acts and of the amendment of the franchise law before the Supreme Court—which rejected it. Appeal at that time was pending before the Privy Council.

The statement said that while awaiting the ruling of the Privy Council, the CIC had decided to launch a satyagraha campaign to focus public attention on the injustice inflicted on a mass of people who had been born, bred and had lived in Lanka for generations.

Through satyagraha we wish to focus public attention on the need for securing (a) a citizenship law that is reasonable and fair and (b) the immediate restoration of the franchise to those deprived of it, enabling them to exercise it at the forthcoming elections. In this endeavour to achieve an amicable settlement of a long-standing problem, we invoke the blessings of God and the co-operation and sympathy of all".

At 11.15 a.m. on Monday, April 28, 1952, election day, a procession of 41 satyagrahis led by Thondaman and Aziz marched with placards declaring "We want citizenship and franchise".

Thondaman was dressed in pure kedar verti and shirt and Aziz in white, North Indian dress. They marched from the CIC head office at No. 213, Main Street, Pettah, in the direction of Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake's office in the Senate building, where the defence ministry is now situated. The procession was halted at the junction of York Street by police and ordered to disperse.

Thondaman told the satyagrahis to stop where they were and he went forward with Aziz to meet the police inspector.

"We are marching peacefully. Why do you want us to disperse?", demanded Thondaman.

"That was our order," the police inspector replied politely.

"We're not going to disperse", Aziz said.

The inspector ordered his men to carry the satyagrahis to the police vans parked nearby. They were carried to the vans and dropped at various points in the city. Thondaman and Aziz were dropped near Wellawatta. They climbed into a bus and returned to Fort. They asked for an interview with Sir Kandiah Vaithianathan, Secretary to the Prime Minister, and sat down on the verandah outside the prime minister's office. Other satyagrahis came back and squatted in Gardon Gardens, then a small public garden in front of the Senate building.

These men were again taken off in two or three vans and dropped at different places. Thondaman and Aziz were dropped at their respective residences.

On the second day, April 29, police were in for a surprise. Thondaman and Aziz arrived at the prime minister's office and sat outside on the verandah. Many other satyagrahis joined them. At the same time—it was about 8 a.m. — Rajalingam and 50 satyagrahis gathered outside parliament building at Galle Face and occupied the steps.

Some time later police arrived and asked Rajalingam and his group to leave the premises. They refused and were transported by vans to Victoria Park. Thondaman and Aziz were carried into the van and dropped at Homagama, nearly 25 kilometres from Colombo.

On the third day, April 30, four groups performed satyagraha at four different places. Thondaman and Aziz and a group of fifty others were at the Senate building before dawn. Police removed them as on previous day, and dropped them about 25 kilometers away on the Kandy road.

Sinhala peasants offered them water and refreshment but some car owners refused to give them a lift when they realised who they were. A Sinhala school master took them to a bus halt in his car, even though he was told their identity. Thondaman and Aziz returned to Colombo by bus and took up their positions again. Again they were removed and dropped at Arakamala, on the Ingriya road.

The second batch, led by Rajalingam, sat on the grounds opposite the ministry of Home Affairs throughout the day. The Inspector General of Police walked up to Rajalingam and told him to desist from such action.

"We are performing this satyagraha not to hurt anyone. This is not even an anti-government act. We are doing this only to draw the attention of the people and the government to the injustice done to their brothers" Rajalingam replied.

"You are creating a law and order problem and it may lead to breach of the peace", the IGP said.

"No. There's no possibility of that. We've taken a pledge not to indulge in any violence", Rajalingam replied.

"All right. All right", the IGP said and walked away.

The third group, 30 satyagrahis led by Kumaravelu, R. M. Selliah and V. R. Sevaga Perumal, sat on the verandah of the Ministry of Justice. An inspector and ten police constables surrounded them and assaulted them with batons. They also abused them.

The fourth group, led by S. M. Palanisamy and T. M. Ramasamy, performed satyagraha on the premises of the Ministry of Food. They refused to disperse and finally, in the evening, were forcibly ejected from the building. Some satyagrahis were assaulted.

Some of the satyagrahis on their way to join Thondaman and Aziz at the Senate building, were taken and locked up in a tiny room in the Fort police station. After they had been there for some time, they were herded into a police van and were dropped at different places on the Negombo road.

Colombo grew tense and people began to gather opposite government offices to watch the satyagraha. The police presence was evident everywhere and public attention was drawn to the citizenship problem. For the first three days the English language dailies ignored the satyagraha. By Thursday they could ignore it no longer. So they started printing protest letters from insignificant Indian Tamil merchant groups. They wrote long ed torials about the dangerous situation the satyagraha could create.

In India the satyagraha made big news and the Indian government handed an aide memoire to the Lankan High Commissioner in New Delhi. The Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru referred to the satyagraha movement in one of his speeches.

On the fourth day, May 1, the government attitude changed. Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake came out of his office and asked Thondaman and Aziz who were fasting outside, to come in.

They went in and they talked for over one and a half hours. They could not reach any agreement. The two CIC leaders came out and sat on the verandah again and continued their fast.

Rajalingam and his group were bundled into a van and dropped at Padukka on that day, because instructions had not reached them. They were given tea and short-cats by the Sinhala villagers who also put them into a Colombo-bound bus.

From May 1, for 140 days, the satyagraha and relay fast continued. The council of action had decided that two groups of about 50 each should fast for five days at

the Prime Minister's office and the House of Representatives. At the end of the fifth day two fresh groups would take over the fast. The satyagrahis were allowed to take only three drinks of orange juice a day.

While the relay fast was on, the general election was held in May. Dudley romped home with a comfortable majority. Not a single Indian Tamil won a seat and not even a nominated membership was given them. The opening of parliament was fixed for June 2. On that day parliament was heavily guarded and the hunger strikers were not permitted to enter the premises.

The CIC decided that they should stage the satyagraha whatever the consequences. About 15 of the volunteers got into cars, beat the guards and went up the ceremonial flight of steps. Police caught them and asked them to leave.

"We have come as former members of parliament to present a petition to the Prime Minister who is inside", Thondaman told the police.

Police contacted Dudley Senanayake, the Prime Minister. He ordered that they be thrown out. Police then seized them physically and threw them out on to the parliament lawn. Aziz walked to the parapet wall along the Galle Road and sat on it. Police went after him and asked him to move. He refused. Police then relented and allowed him carry on.

Within parliament, all the new MPs had assembled. They were from the UNP, SLFP, Federal Party, LSSP, CP and Tamil Congress. Only W. Dahanayake came out to see them. Dahanayake also brought with him the waiter from the parliament restaurant, carrying a jar of water and a few glasses. Thondaman walked up to Dahanayake and thanked him. He and Aziz drank the water.

They then sat down on the lawn. This enraged the police. They ordered the mounted police to push the satyagrahis back. A mounted policeman rode straight into them. Thondaman jumped up and caught the reins. He gave the horse a strong punch close to the animal's nose. That unsettled the rider and upset the white stallion. Rider and horse then withdrew.

The CIC withdrew the satyagraha campaign as it found the government relentless. The process of de-citizensation and disfranchisement continued.

The CIC also withdrew its boycott call and advised Indian Tamils to apply for citizenship. About 850,000 of them did so.

CHAPTER 4

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CRISIS

The decision to withdraw the satyagraha campaign was taken after prolonged consideration. All were growing weary of the dragging agitation. It was telling on the organisation, its finances and morale. It had become clear that Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake was getting stubborn. Dudley was encouraged by an upsurge of Sinhala opinion which backed his unyielding stand. Besides, the interest the local and international media first showed had evaporated.

Within the CIC itself, a strong opinion in favour of withdrawing the satyagraha had emerged. Thondaman led that group. He spearheaded the campaign for the withdrawal. He argued: "The purpose for which the campaign was launched has been achieved. We made the world aware of the injustice perpetrated on the Indian Tamils. So we must vary the strategy".

D. T. Chari, first Indian diplomat to be appointed Deputy High Commissioner in Colombo, also advised withdrawal. Chari, an admirer of Aziz when he had served in Colombo earlier as Agent of India, hurriedly arranged a meeting with Aziz and Thondaman on his arrival. At that meeting he said: "You chaps have been taken for a ride. The high commission has reported to the foreign office against you."

That was shocking news to the CIC leaders. They had believed that the Indian High Commissioner, Kesava Menon, was encouraging them. They never expected him to be influenced by the Indian trading community in Colombo, the handmaid of the UNP. Menon had reported that the satyagraha was the result of a design by Aziz, a convinced leftist. Nehru smelled a rat when he read those reports. He sent Chari to Colombo to relay the actual situation. He created the post of Deputy High Commissioner for that purpose.

Chari did two things. He advised Aziz to step down from the leadership and hand it over to Thondaman. He told him that though he was an admirer of long standing his advice (to Aziz) was to step down in the interests of the Indian community. "New Delhi has been prejudiced against you. By handing over leadership to Thondaman, an Indias Tamil, New Delhi's interest can be revived". Chari said.

Aziz was annoyed, even angry. But he understood the reasoning and agreed to accept the advice.

Chari also advised the CIC to reverse its boycott decision and get the Indian Tamils to apply for citizenship. "Be pragmatic", was Chari's advice. Thondaman immediately accepted it. Pragmatism and practicality had by then become ingrained in Thondaman's own character.

He had learnt that approach from Mahatma Gandhi.

Thondaman met Gandhi just 30 days before the Mahatma was slain by Godse in 1948. He had briefed him on the Indian and Pakistani (Residents) Citizenship Act that had just been passed. Thondaman told him of the welter of difficult conditions that had to be satisfied to acquire citizenship.

Mahatma Gandhi said: "It's not right to expect illiterate people to fill forms. They don't know to write their own names. Will they be able to fill all these forms and produce these documents? We must learn to trust man first all Ceylon Indians must be made citizens on a temporary basis. Then the officials should go into each case and determine whether they are entitled to be citizens or not. That should be the correct approach."

Thondaman was deeply impressed by this and made practicality and trust in others his way of life. An incident that occurred early in 1979 reveals the extent to which Thondaman applied this lesson in his own life. As Minister of Rural Industrial Development he visited Kurunegala to inspect the dairy farms.

A Sinhala youth wanted to show the minister some of his beautiful creations from bamboo and Thondaman

was so taken up with the boy's high craftsmanship that he asked him to start a factory for export purposes.

"I'm unable to sell these, sir", the youth said apologetically.

"Why? You can sell them to Salu Sala."

"I tried, but they refused to buy them".

"Why?"

"They say I must first register with them, then they will send an inspector to see whether the articles conform to standard", the youth said.

"Have you not registered?" the Minister asked.

"I did that a few months ago, but the inspector has not come".

Thondaman asked the youth to meet him at the Ministry at Kollupitiya two days later.

When the boy arrived the officials were there. Thondaman directed him to display his handicraft and asked the officials why they had not bought the goods. They explained the procedure, which needed over six months to complete the inspection stage.

Thondaman asked: "Why don't you accept his word as a guarantee of quality. Register him temporarily and then send your official on inspection. If the report is adverse then remove the boy from the register of suppliers".

Salu Sala adopted that directive and is following it still.

Thondaman had been influenced by Gandhiji since his student days. But his first meeting with him was in 1940 at Wardha after his welcome speech at the Gam-pola convention. When Thondaman was ushered in, Gandhi was just setting out for his morning walk with his two grand-daughters. He saw Thondaman and called "Come in, young man". Thondaman touched his feet in homage. The Mahatma asked about the situation in Ceylon and the problems of the estate workers. When he was about to get up, Thondaman held out his autograph

book and asked him to sign it.

Gandhiji looked up and asked: "Where is my fee?"

Thondaman was puzzled. He had never expected him to ask for money. He was unsure how much he should offer. Noticing his bewilderment, Gandhiji smiled and said: "You should not do anything scot free. My charge is five rupees".

It was the first time Thondaman heard the phrase 'scot free' and he still delights in using it himself.

Thondaman wanted the CIC to adopt a practical approach. He reasoned that there were only three months left to file applications for citizenship. "If we fail to apply within this period we shall be in a bigger mess. We may have to beg the government to give us an extension". That settled it.

The Hatton sessions in September 1952 adopted a resolution authorising the working committee to withdraw the satyagraha campaign. The resolution said its objective had been achieved and with the moral strength they had gathered through the satyagraha, the CIC was ready to enter the next phase of the struggle for citizenship.

The decision to apply for citizenship earned the approval of all the four Indian leaders invited to the Hatton conference. Archariya Kripalani, his wife Sujatha both from the Indian National Congress, favoured the decision. "You have to apply under the gazetted regulations and continue your struggle to make the qualifications required for citizenship reasonable", Kripalani said.

Ashok Metha, the Indian socialist leader, also told the sessions that the better course would be to apply while continuing the struggle for relaxation of the stringent conditions. M. P. Sivagna Gramani, the fiery orator from Tamil Nadu, said: "Withdrawing to a safe haven before launching a fierce frontal attack is a well known battle strategy. We are just doing that",

The decision to ask the people to apply was difficult; its execution even more so. There were only three

months left and eight and a half lakhs of people were involved. Most of them were illiterate and unable to do anything on their own.

The working committee met in emergency session a few days later. Thondaman announced that he would take personal charge of the entire operation and the working committee assigned him the task. After the meeting, Thondaman called Ramanujam to his Wevandon home. "This is a massive task", he told him. "We must succeed. There is no question of failure".

"That's true", Ramanujam agreed. "If we fail we will be cursed by the future generations".

"You are talking of future generations. If we fail the present generation will chase us away", Thondaman said.

They mapped out their strategy. They collected a band of educated, able youths and told them not to worry about expenses. "All your expenses will be met. You will also be paid a small allowance", Thondaman said and added: "Think that this is a scared duty. It's a duty to our people".

After the meeting Ramanujam said he would have spoken of duty first and money later. Thondamas replied "no; you must look after them first and then tell them what to do".

Thondaman and his band worked very hard in the next three months. They printed the application forms and themselves took them to every estate. They went in the evenings and nights to the estate line rooms. They had to go stealthily, for outsiders were not permitted to visit the line rooms, at nights.

Once, when they had slipped into an estate at Mas-keliya, it was long past midnight. Most of the estate workers who had waited for them since dusk had retired to bed. When Thondaman and the three CIC workers reached the line rooms the dogs started a howl. The watcher came running. He had to be 'managed' with a ten-rupee note for which he helped Thondaman to wake up the workers. By the time they had filled up the forms it was early dawn.

There were lots of problems in filling the application forms. Some workers had changed estates so often

it was difficult to get accurate details of their residence. Some were not aware of the names of their grandfathers. In one case, a worker said he had run away from his family when he was six or seven years of age and he knew nothing about his family. All he remembered was that they lived on an estate in Avissawella.

The CIC met the challenge. All the eight and a half lakhs of Indian Tamils filed their applications. It gave the CIC and Thondaman valuable organisational experience. It also gave them self-confidence. And it won Thondaman respect among the Ceylon Indian population.

That was not the only crisis Thondaman and the CIC had to face during the second parliament, 1952-56. The country itself was confronted with difficult situations and their fallout affected the Indian Tamil population. The first crisis was the rice-rubber pact with China.

By 1952 the Korean war boom was over and the country's external assets had dwindled drastically. When the situation was pretty bad, Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake directed Trade and Commerce Minister R. G. Senanayake to explore the possibility of bartering rubber for rice with China. He did so after Sir John Kotelawala had failed to obtain aid from the United States.

R. G. Senanayake clinched a rubber-rice deal with China, but Ceylon earned the condemnation of the anti-communist world by this pact.

At that time Thondaman was in Malaysia to attend an international trade union conference. A reporter asked him: "What is your opinion of the rubber-rice deal with China?"

Thondaman: I welcome it.

Reporter: Is it not wrong to trade with a communist country?

Thondaman: What we wanted was rice to feed our people. America refused to help. But China was willing to give us rice. Do you mean to say we must starve our people saying we don't want communist rice?"

The CIC took a public stand in support of the rubber-rice pact and Thondaman sent a congratulatory

message to R. G. Senanayake on the success of the Chinese mission.

Even after the rubber-rice pact, the foreign exchange position continued to slide. In 1953, the Central Bank Governor, John Exter, reported to the cabinet that immediate action should be taken to arrest the foreign asset decline. He recommended total removal of the subsidy on rice, which was sold at 25 cents a measure though it cost the government 70 cents. The cabinet plunged into heated debate, but Finance Minister J. R. Jayewardene supported Exter's recommendation.

"Let's face this dangerous situation squarely and do what is in the best interest of the country. Let's abolish the subsidy at once" Jayewardene argued.

Finally the cabinet accepted it by a majority decision. It was decided to issue two measures per person per week but to charge the cost price of 70 cents a measure.

There was uproar in parliament. The Left political parties decided to call a hartal. They tried to rope in the CWC. But the CWC decided to stay out. During the hartal workers set up road blocks and crowds lit bonfires on the roads. Dudley Senanayake proclaimed an emergency and called for an emergency cabinet meeting.

Meanwhile a crowd had collected at Mutwal and police opened fire injuring a few workers. A parliamentary official, sent there to report to Dudley Senanayake then in parliament, was shot by police who mistook the taxi he travelled in to be the one they had been tipped off was carrying explosives. When this was reported to him Dudley fainted and had to be carried out of parliament.

The hartal went on for three days. When the protests subsided Dudley resigned, taking responsibility for the happenings. Sir John Kotelawala was sworn in as the Prime Minister and his tenure was very bad for the Indian Tamils.

Sir John tightened the screw on Indian Tamils through a series of regulations. He placed greater restrictions on persons who lived in Ceylon with residence permits. He also stopped the issue of residence permits. He made it discretionary on the part of the minister in charge

of the subject of citizenship to decide on the granting of citizenship to the spouse of a citizen. He also brought in provision to cancel the citizenship of anyone who became involved in a criminal act, political or otherwise.

High Commissioner Desai, who enjoyed a personal friendship with Sir John, could not stem this trend. But he arranged talks in Delhi between Nehru and Sir John in January 1954. The CIC wanted to send a delegation to watch the interests of the Indian Tamils. They wrote to the Indian foreign ministry but the request was turned down.

The CIC working committee met in emergency session. Thondaman was extremely critical of India's decision. He told the meeting: "Desai is the person mainly responsible for keeping representation of the CIC out of Indo-Ceylon discussions.....Ever since he arrived in Ceylon he has endeavoured to take upon himself the task of being the saviour of the Ceylon Indian community and it is most unfortunate that his efforts have had the most disastrous consequences".

The CIC decided to send Aziz to meet Nehru and explain the need for a CIC delegation. Aziz was reluctant. He feared a rebuff. But K. G. S. Nair persuaded him to go and present the CIC viewpoint to Nehru. "Think this involves the future of a million people". Nair told Aziz Thondaman too persuaded Aziz to go to Delhi.

Aziz had a cold reception in Delhi. The Indian foreign office considered his visit an embarrassment. He was told Nehru was leaving to South India the following day and had no time to see him. He was shown Nehru's diary, which showed that every minute was tied up with some engagement.

After persistent urging Dutt, who headed the Commonwealth desk of the foreign ministry agreed to inform Nehru of Aziz's visit. Nehru wanted to see Aziz that night at his residence. The meeting lasted 75 minutes and Nehru questioned Aziz very closely about the plight of the Ceylon Indians. Nehru told him that he would like a CIC delegation to be in Delhi, to brief him.

Meanwhile, the CIC organised a mass meeting at the Colombo town hall to demand that India should not come to any agreement with the Ceylon government without

consulting the CIC. Thondaman, the key speaker, criticised Desai. He said: "Mr. Desai is not the representative of the Ceylon Indians".

Nehru instructed the Indian High Commission in Colombo to ask the CIC to send a delegation to New Delhi. Aziz, Thondaman and Somasundaram made up the delegation. Sir John had S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who was then in the opposition in his team.

The CIC delegation was accommodated in a room next to the conference room. The Indian officials consulted the CIC delegation at every stage.

An agreement called the Nehru-Kotelawala agreement was reached in the three main areas of dispute. Sir John undertook to speed up the disposal of citizenship applications, the main grouse of Ceylon Indians. The Ceylon immigration department was very slow in handling applications and its officials were giving the most stringent interpretation to the qualifications needed for citizenship. Sir John undertook to be more liberal.

An agreement was also reached about residence permit-holders. It was agreed that Indian citizens who obtained Indian citizenship should be permitted to live and work in Ceylon till the age of 55. The two Prime Ministers also agreed to create four seats in parliament for those registering as Ceylon citizens on the basis of a separate electoral roll.

When the CIC delegation returned to Colombo, Thondaman was asked by the press for his views on the Delhi agreement. He replied: "If the agreement is to be a success the Ceylon government should continue to display the spirit shown at the Delhi conference".

Immigration department officials however did not show the same spirit of accommodation and understanding as the political leadership at the Delhi conference. Registration was slow and made cumbersome. Officials asked for all sorts of impossible documents.

Dismayed, the CIC organised a public meeting at the Kandy town hall on March 15, 1954. Thondaman said there: "We thought things would ease after the Delhi meeting, but they have got worse".

He related many instances in which officials had discouraged applicants from seeking Ceylon citizenship and advised them to apply for Indian status.

"The officials have no business to tell our people what to do. It's our right to decide to which country we belong. We don't need any advice from anyone", he declared.

India was worried too about the slow pace of registration. A meeting of officials was held in Delhi and the CIC sent a delegation under Thondaman. India and Ceylon agreed to implement the January accord "humanely".

On his return to Colombo, Thondaman told the press. "We are glad that we were able to convince them all that the administration of the Indian and Pakistani (Resident) Citizenship Act is being done in a very stringent manner and the large number of rejections are due to this fact rather than lack of qualifications of the applicants".

He gave as an example a dumb man who had satisfied every qualification but whose application was rejected on the ground that he did not take the oath.

The Delhi agreement could not be implemented in full as the political climate soon began to change. Sir John had become popular with the people by reducing the price of rationed rice from 70 cents to 45 cents. The country was also enjoying prosperity as the prices of tea, rubber and coconut had soared. He had arranged for the visit of Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh. And the prominent role he played at the Bandung Conference had made him the **Bandung veeraya**.

Meanwhile, Bandaranaike was actively forging an anti-UNP front called the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, into which he brought Philip Gunewardene and his group. He had made 'Sinhala Only' and a 'rightful place for Buddhism' the slogans of the new grouping. The MEP launched a countrywide campaign which won it the support of the Buddhist clergy, Sinhala teachers, ayurvedic physicians and minor grades in the government service.

It was about then that Sir John visited Jaffna and at a reception, at Kokuvil Hindu College, declared that Ceylon belonged to all communities who should all work

together for a united nation. Sinhala and Tamil would be declared the national languages.

Later, on pressure from party colleagues, he withdrew from that position.

As the language issue heated up Sir John went to the other extreme. He caused the Kelaniya session of the UNP to pass a resolution declaring Sinhala the only official language of Ceylon. Tamils and most of the Muslims opposed it. Sir Kanthiah Vaithianathan and S. Nadesan, the two Tamil ministers in the Kotelawala government, resigned from the government and the UNP.

Sir John had planned to celebrate Buddha Jayanthi in 1956, marking the 2500 anniversary of the birth of Buddhism. Opinion with the UNP then was that the general election should be held after the celebration. Sir John, elated by his popularity, thought otherwise. "We will come back and celebrate Buddha Jayanthi", he told his critics.

Ceylon Indians lacked strength to field their own candidates in the 1956 election. The CIC and Thondaman felt aggrieved about the growing communalism in the country. They supported the Federal Party in the north and east and the Left candidates elsewhere.

Addressing a largely attended public meeting at the Jaffna town hall on March 8, 1955, Thondaman said the CIC had served the up-country Tamils in the fifteen years of its existence. "Now it is entering the next stage—the stage of serving the rest of the Tamil population as well".

He said the Sinhala leadership had created two grounds for distress among the Tamil people—state-aided colonisation of the north and east and denial of citizenship to the up-country Tamils. They are adding the third, the language issue", he said.

From then, he emerged as a leader of all Tamils in Ceylon. His advice was sought by them and he involved himself in their problems. He explained his interest and involvement in the Tamil language problem thus: "Tamil is our language and any discrimination against the Tamil language is a discrimination against us".

Meanwhile the long standing clash in the CIC became public. Aziz and Thondaman, were two powerful perso-

nalities from different backgrounds and ideologies: Thondaman the son of an estate worker who later rose to be an estate owner. Aziz the son of a businessman.

Thondaman spent his youth on the estate among plantation workers. Aziz, who migrated to Ceylon with a commerce degree from Bombay University, was frequenting the elite YMCA Forum where he rose to be Prime Minister of the Young Men's Parliament. Thondaman managed his father's estate while Aziz managed his father's business. Thondaman spoke the language of the estate workers, Aziz spoke to them through an interpreter. Thondaman was a Hindu, like most estate workers. Aziz was a Muslim.

Although Thondaman and Aziz had been drawn to the CIC because of the common threat to the Ceylon Indian community from emerging Sinhala nationalism, they represented basically different interest and beliefs. Thondaman was and is a Gandhian; Aziz a socialist. Thondaman approached the problems of Ceylon Indians in a pragmatic way. Aziz approached them intellectually.

Being strong personalities, each became the centre of two opposing groups. The first direct clash between these two leaders was in 1945, when Thondaman won presidency of the organisation against Aziz. This contest continued at every session. In 1954 it took a serious turn.

The 1954 annual sessions was held at Hatton and Aziz decided to contest the presidency. Thondaman nominated Somasundaram to contest Aziz. In the election Aziz won but Thondaman group captured most of the places in the Executive Committee. This intensified the clash between the two factions. Ultimately on December 13, 1955, Aziz was expelled from the organisation. He challenged it in the District Court of Colombo. The court dismissed his applications on the ground that Aziz had not exhausted the internal remedies available to him.

The Hatton sessions also decided on a name-change. There was a persistent campaign by Sinhala politicians and the press that the CIC was more Indian than Ceylonese. They pointed to the word 'Indian' in the title Ceylon Indian Congress and the Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union. The sessions decided to change the name of the Ceylon Indian Congress to Ceylon Democratic Congress and

the Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union to Ceylon Workers Congress.

With the expulsion, Aziz launched a new organisation and named it Democratic Workers Congress on January 1, 1956. Nair and Velupillai went along with him. Aziz captured the head office at Main Street, Pettah, Colombo and most of the district offices—Badulla, Yatiyantota, Talawakelle, Matugama and Haputale.

The Ceylon Workers Congress was with Thondaman. He rented a separate building for the head office. He organised new files to be started. He launched a massive membership drive. He built up a formidable organisation from scratch. That led to clashes.

The day after Tamil New Year day in 1956 (April 15) a group of labourers set upon Thondaman when he visited an estate in Ohiya. They attacked his jeep with clubs and damaged it. They also injured a police constable travelling in Thondaman's car. Workers who had gathered to receive Thondaman retaliated and a free for all ensued.

That was not an isolated incident. Such incidents became the order of the day. There were clashes between workers of different estates. There were brawls between different groups on the same estate. There were feuds within families. There was dissension in the entire plantation sector. There was unrest.

Aziz and Thondaman traded charges. Aziz said Thondaman was a capitalist, an estate owner who did not have the interest of the worker at heart. Thondaman cleverly turned that same charge against Aziz. At a public meeting on March 16, 1956, at the Dunbar grounds in Hatton, Thondaman said: "Mr. Aziz accuses me of being a capitalist and thus tries to impress upon you that he is a friend of the workers. I challenge Mr. Aziz to prove it by agreeing to hand over to the congress all the surplus wealth he has accumulated since his association with Congress. If he does, I will follow suit. That would show who the real capitalist is".

The government and the Employers' Federation continued to recognise the CWC as the only trade union of the plantation workers and continued to negotiate with it. The CWE nominated Thondaman, as worker representative, to the Tea Growing and Manufacturing and Rub-

ber Growing and Manufacturing Trade Wages Boards. Aziz had been the worker-member of these boards from 1943, the year in which those boards were established.

That year, Thondaman was also selected the workers' representative on Ceylon's tripartite delegation to the International Labour Organisation Conference in Geneva. He was elected to the governing body, which position he held until he became a government minister in 1978.

The crisis was not only in the CWC. Dark clouds were gathering even on the national scene. But there was a difference between the two situations. In the case of the CWC the crisis helped it to build a strong trade union organisation. But in the case of the nation, the much hailed socio-cultural revival only spewed the seeds of national disaster.

CHAPTER 5

THE LANGUAGE BOMB

Thondaman called on Bandaranaike at his residence at Rosmead Place, on the evening of April 13, 1956. Bandaranaike had been sworn in as the new Prime Minister the previous morning. He was pleased to see Thondaman and ushered him into the sitting room.

"Sirima", Bandaranaike shouted inside. "Thonda is here. Bring some tea".

Thondaman told Bandaranaike that he was very glad about his victory.

"Thank you, Thank you". Bandaranaike was profusely appreciative.

They then started to talk about the language issue. "We welcome your giving the Sinhala language its rightful place. Like wise we expect you to give a rightful place to the Tamil language", Thondaman said.

Bandaranaike readily agreed. "That's my thinking too".

Thondaman added: "If you deny Tamil its rightful place, there will be problems later".

Bandaranaike was emphatic: "I'll be fair by all".

Bandaranaike could not keep his word — but not because he did not want to be fair. He had become prisoner of the very forces he had unleashed.

He had collected around him a band of extremists. That was partly because of his Sinhala Maha Sabha past and also because of the elements he had welded into the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (Peoples' United Front). Within the SLFP were the Sinhala extremists spreading the gospel of a Sinhala Buddhist nation. When the MEP

swept the 1956 polls, winning 51 of the 95 elected seats. the extremist elements surrounded Bandaranaike and virtually throttled him.

A delegation of prominent Tamils and Muslims met Bandaranaike at Rosmead Place to discuss the future of the Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon. The delegation included Sir Arunachalam Mahadeva, Sir Kanthiah Vaithianathan, Senator S. Nadesan, Dr. M. C. M. Kaleel, Senator A. M. A. Azeez, Thondaman and others. With Bandaranaike were Ven. Buddharakkitha Thera and L. H. Mettananda.

The delegation congratulated Bandaranaike on his victory and went straight to the point of their visit. Nadesan, their spokesman, told the Prime Minister there should be an immediate settlement of the language problem. The minorities were ready to help, not obstruct him in his declared policy of making Sinhala the official language.

Mettananda cut in, saying the general election was fought on the language issue and there was no point in raising the question again. He added: "Sinhala has to be the language of the country."

Buddharakkitha said the same thing: "Sinhala will be the only official language."

Dr. Kaleel intervened: "We came here to speak to the Prime Minister, not to you. Allow the Prime Minister to reply".

Bandaranaike: They both belong to my party and have a right to speak.

Ven. Buddharakkitha: Are you trying to tell us what we should do? We have got a mandate from the people and it will not be altered.

The delegation felt that it would serve no purpose to continue the talk and decided to leave. Bandaranaike accompanied them to the garden, offered them soft drinks, and saw them off.

In the first week of May, Bandaranaike had a meeting with the Attorney-General and the Legal Draftsman. They discussed guidelines for the Language Bill. Bandaranaike told them that in accordance with the

people's mandate. Sinhala should be the only official language. To satisfy the aspirations of the Tamil-speaking people of the north and east provision should be made for the 'reasonable use' of Tamil. Then there should be a period of transition, determined by parliament, from English to Sinhala. He wanted the Bill to contain a clause which gave every citizen the right to communicate with the government in his mother tongue, in any part of the island.

When this news leaked out Prof. F. R. Jayasuriya commenced a 'fast-unto-death' at the parliament premises, demanding that Sinhala should be the only official language and no concession given to any other. Bandaranaike, a weak leader, succumbed to the pressure and decided on a single clause which read: "Sinhala shall be the only official language of Ceylon."

The Bill was debated on June 5, 1956. The Federal Party which had swept the north in the 1956 election, winning 10 seats, staged a satyagraha at Galle Face Green in opposition. An unruly crowd attacked the demonstrators. Chelvanayakam was thrown into the dirty waters of the Beira lake. Amirthalingam was hit on his head with a club — and went to the parliament chamber, blood streaming from his head, to be greeted by Bandaranaike: "the honoured wounds of war!"

Thondaman was in Colombo when this happened. Hearing of the attacks, he rushed to Chelvanayakam's home. A big crowd had gathered there. Chelvanayakam came out and embraced Thondaman.

"How are you, sir?" Thondaman asked.

"I'm all right", Chelvanayakam smiled.

"Are you hurt?" Thondaman wanted to know.

"That's a small thing.....But this is the beginning", Chelvanayakam replied.

Thondaman was distressed. He met the press and condemned the attack on the satyagrahis. When a pressman asked why, as the CWC was not involved, Thondaman replied: "Tamil is our mother tongue and we will not take lightly any insult to our language or community."

The passing of the Sinhala Only Act and the Buddha Jayanthi celebration won Bandaranaike and the SLFP immense popularity. For the Buddha Jayanthi celebrations Bandaranaike invited the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi,

Thondaman was an invitee to the banquet Bandaranaike gave at 'Temple Trees'. K. Ranjappan, the Competent Authority of Colombo Gas and Water Company, spotted Nehru moving close to Thondaman and wanted to take a picture of their meeting. As he was about to leave, Nehru called him back.

"I want Indira also to be with us", Nehru said, calling his daughter who was in a crowd not far away.

When Indira joined them Nehru said in introduction: "Mr. Thondaman, a great leader of the Ceylon Indian community".

Indira blushed, stretching out her hand which Thondaman held in both his, saying: "I have the privilege of leading the very Congress your father helped found".

With the passing of the Sinhala Only Act the setting for the ethnic crisis was created. The Federal Party organised the Trincomalee march in April 1957 and passed the resolution setting four demands — an end to state-aided colonisation; granting of citizenship to all Tamils who elect to live in Ceylon; granting of official status to the Tamil language; and proclamation of a federal constitution.

The resolution set a time-frame of August 20 1957. If the government failed to grant their demands by then, it would launch a satyagraha campaign.

The SLFP reacted with anger to satyagraha threat. A party spokesman issued a press statement threatening to raise a volunteer corps, one lakh strong, to deal with the satyagraha.

Thondaman replied to the SLFP threat on May 28, 1957. In a statement he said: "It is unfortunate that the proposal of the SLFP to meet the FP's proposed satyagraha campaign in August has apparently been con-

ceived in a spirit of anger and aggression. Assurances on the part of the FP are categorical that their campaign will be strictly according to the principles of satyagraha and that the only force they will use is 'soul force'.

"The probabilities are that they will adhere to the program as enunciated by them. From which source then does the SLFP expect a breach of peace? The answer is clear from happenings during the one-day token satyagraha launched by the FP last year. Hooligans took charge of the city of Colombo and bedlam was let loose. Obviously then, the mischief-makers are not the satyagrahis but the anti-social elements who, in their madness, organised and encouraged such hooligans".

In that statement, Thondaman also administered a strong warning to the SLFP. He said: "Time and time again history has proved that such an approach never succeeds in suppressing; it merely aggravates the situation and makes opposition more bitter."

The Bandaranaike government added provocation. Transport Minister Maitripala Senanayake introduced the Sinhala Sri number plates for motor vehicles, which resulted in Federal Party's anti-Sri campaign. Motor vehicles in the north and the east started running with Tamil-Shri number plates.

The tar brush campaign followed. Sinhala extremists tarred the Tamil lettering in street name boards. Similarly Tamils in the north and east tarred out the Sinhala names. Schools in the north and east which were teaching Sinhala as an optional subject discontinued it. The Federal Party directed Tamil government servants not to work in Sinhala.

As the anti-Sri campaign gained momentum in the north and east, up-country Tamils were drawn into it emotionally. In some places like Talawakelle, Ceylon Indian Tamil youths "blackened out" — Sinhala street names. At Bogawantalawa, a few youths gathered at the entrance of an estate and stopped all passing vehicles with Sinhala Sri number plates and painted tar over the 'Sri'.

Police arrested them and locked them up. Estate workers gathered in thousands opposite the Bogawan-

talawa police station, demanding their release. Police opened fire, killing a worker named Ayyavu Francis. Enraged estate workers attacked Sinhala-owned shops and buildings and even assaulted some Sinhala passers by. Sinhalese retaliated. Tamils then barricaded the roads with huge stones, felled trees and obstructed the police.

Prime Minister Bandaranaike was informed of the developing danger. He telephoned Thondaman. Thondaman replied that he was aware of the happenings.

"Thonda! I want you to go there and calm the people. We must prevent a flare-up".

"I will certainly help", Thondaman replied. By then he was sure of his influence with the plantation Tamils.

He went by car with Sellasamy, but they could not proceed beyond Norwood. Roads were barricaded. He walked the eleven kilometres to Bogawantalawa, meeting and appealing to the people to remove the stones and tree trunks. He met the police, the CWC district and estate leaders and the Sinhala leaders of the area. He defused the tension. He arranged for the funeral of Ayyavu Francis.

He called Bandaranaike from Nuwara Eliya to tell him that the situation had been brought under control. Bandaranaike was profuse in his thanks. He said: "Thonda! I envy you. If I had the same control over the Sinhala people there would be no trouble in this country".

That incident was significant for many reasons. It revealed the extent that Ceylon Indians were emotionally involved in the happenings in the north and east. It also illustrated the difference in the two situations. It showed for the first time that the estate Tamils were weak no more and prepared to rise even against the police. And it demonstrated the power of Thondaman's hold over the Indian Tamils.

After returning to Colombo, Thondaman issued a statement advising Ceylon Indian Tamil youths not to be rash. In that statement of July 1957 he pointed the difference in the two situations: the Tamils of the north and east were living in areas where they constituted the majority. The Tamils of the hill country were living in the midst of a Sinhala population. Ceylon Indian

Tamil youth should realise this significant difference, he said.

"We also are Tamils. Tamil is our language. Any harm done to the Tamils or the Tamil language will naturally disturb us. We are entitled to register our sympathy and support with the Tamils of the north and the east. We must also realise the environment in which we live. While sympathising with the Tamils of the north and east, we should not create occasion for disturbance", Thondaman said.

Emotionally, he identified with the Federal Party demands. On June 1, 1957 he wrote a letter to Bandaranaike in which he drew a distinction between the extremists and the government. The letter said:

"We are conscious that the government has its difficulties, with reactionary elements attributing the economic ills of the island to the existence of the Tamils. We are also deeply conscious of the sense of bitterness and frustration which has grown among all Tamils, about the language policy of the government. In this situation, I wonder whether it would not be possible for some kind of arrangement to be arrived at, whereby the government would stay its program of implementation of the Sinhala Only Act — so far as it adversely affects the Tamils — for a period of a year, in which a solution of a democratic kind may be found. The FP on its part should suspend and postpone its satyagraha campaign for a year.

"I thought out this suggestion of a standstill arrangement for a year in order that the whole problem may be examined more fully by all parties and a democratic solution found; for I am convinced that a solution for the preservation of the Tamil Language and culture and the rights of the Tamils as a minority can be found on the basis of a united democratic Ceylon".

Thondaman released the letter to the press, which appeared in all the papers the next day. He got a telephone call that morning from Chelvanayakam. Vanniasingham, who was close to Thondaman, took the call and told Thondaman that Chelvanayakam wanted to speak to him. Chelvanayakam asked whether he would be free to come over that afternoon.

The meeting was around 2 p.m. at Chelvanayakam's house in Alfred Place, Vanniasingham was also present. Chelvanayakam asked Thondaman what made him to write that letter.

"I have the feeling that there is room yet for a compromise", Thondaman replied.

"What makes you to feel that?", Chelvanayakam probed.

Thondaman replied: "Bandaranaike is essentially democratic and fair.

"My letter only appealed to his sense of fairness".

Chelvanayakam agreed, but warned that the extremist group around Bandaranaike was very strong and would never permit him to come to any settlement. "Besides, Bandaranaike is weak and vacillating", Chelvanayakam added.

"That's where we must play our card", Thondaman said. "We must isolate the extremist group and strengthen the moderates".

There were many who were willing to act as mediators—Finance Minister Stanley de Soysa and Mr. Badaddin Mahmud were among them.

A series of meetings took place between the government and the Federal Party from early July. The final meeting was held on July 19. It started around 7 p.m. and continued till 3 a.m. Bandaranaike and Chelvanayakam emerged smiling from the Prime Minister's office and handed the waiting pressmen a written document which came to be known as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact.

The document, which was in the form of a joint statement between Bandaranaike and Chelvanayakam, said they had reached agreement within the framework of the Official Language Act and without conceding the demand for a federal constitution. The agreement, in brief, was: Tamil to be the language of administration of the north and eastern provinces; early consideration of the Citizenship Act; and introduction of the system of regional councils for the north and east.

The agreement stipulated a regional council for the northern province; and the eastern province to be divided into two or three regional areas. Provision was also to be made for two or three regions to amalgamate or collaborate. Direct election of the regional council, devolution of power to the regional council on the specified subjects which included agriculture, cooperatives, lands and land development, colonisation, education, health, industries, fisheries, housing, social services, electricity, water schemes and roads. The regional councils given power to select the allottees to whom lands within the areas of their authority were to be alienated. Regional councils would receive block grants from the centre and have power of taxation and borrowing.

In return the Federal Party agreed to withdraw the satyagraha.

Thondaman was pleased with the agreement. He called on Chelvanayakam in the morning (July 20) to thank him for the Citizenship Act provision. It was a memorable meeting. Thondaman told Chelvanayakam: "I must give you credit for being the first man to make the Sinhala leadership accept the necessity to review the Citizenship Act".

Thondaman made a public statement welcoming the B-C pact. He praised Bandaranaike for his statesmanship and said he would earn a place in history as the leader who solved the racial problem. He also hailed Chelvanayakam for his spirit of accommodation.

Things soon took a different turn. J. R. Jayewardene, who by then had emerged as the most important leader in the UNP, seized his opportunity. He organised the Kandy March, which he said was a pilgrimage to the Temple of the Tooth, in protest against the selling of the country to the Tamils. He said the setting up of regional councils with power to merge amounted to the creation of a separate state for the Tamils. He whipped up the Sinhala frengy.

Dudley Senanayake who quit politics after the hartal was by then nursing the hope of re-entering politics. He also seized the opportunity to make his reappearance and issued a hard-hitting statement which said: "I am prepared to sacrifice my life to prevent the implementation of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam agreement, which

is a racial division of Ceylon under the guise of the regional council system and it is an act of treachery on the part of Prime Minister Bandaranaike."

The Kandy March commenced in Colombo and Dudley Senanayake and Jayawardene were at the head of a lengthy procession. SLFP supporters pelted stones, slippers and bricks at the procession as it passed the Grandpass junction. When it reached Kelaniya bridge the attacks intensified. The processionists retaliated.

When the procession reached Imbulgoda, in the Gampaha electorate, the MP of the area, S. D. Bandaranaike sat in the middle of the road and refused to allow the procession to pass. The processionists abandoned the march and retired to the house of a UNP supporter to spend the night. Stones were pelted at them that night.

The UNP leaders left for Kandy the next morning in cars and announced to the country from the precincts of the Dalada Maligawa that they would oppose the regional councils.

The next day, August 9, about a hundred bhikkus performed satyagraha in front of Bandaranaike's Rosemead Place home. They declared they would not leave the place until Bandaranaike tore the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact to pieces. Stones were pelted at the bhikkus and the police tried to carry them away. When these efforts failed, Bandaranaike came out of his house with the document, held it up and tore it, throwing the pieces towards the crowd that had collected. The bhikkus got up chanting 'Sadu, Sadu' and the crowd dispersed.

The Tamils were dismayed and disenchanted. Thondaman was disturbed. He issued a statement to the press, criticising the abrogation of the pact. He said: "Yesterday was the saddest day in the history of Ceylon's racial relations. A solemn pact worked out between the leadership of the country's two main communities has been torn up because of the pressure of a group of extremists.....I am worried whether Tamils in the future will have trust in the Sinhala leadership".

Abrogation of the pact generated more tension and mutual suspicion and in May, 1958, the first racial riots erupted. It followed the slaying of a Sinhalese planter

at Batticaloa. The riots first started in Colombo and spread to the provinces. Tamil government servants were assaulted in their own offices. Tamil shops were torched. Tamil commuters were pulled out of trains and buses and manhandled. Tamils were made refugees for the first time in their own country.

The burning of the Hindu priest at Panadura wounded Hindu sentiment more than any other act.

The priest was pulled out of the Pillayar kovil at Panadura, doused with petrol collected at the nearby shed and torched alive. This was the incident that most influenced the future LTTE leader Prabakaran, then a young boy.

Thondaman too was deeply hurt by it. He telephoned Bandaranaike the very night the disturbances started and told him of the happenings of the day. "Things are getting out of hand," he said and prayed Bandaranaike to declare a state of emergency.

Bandaranaike promised action but asked whether it was necessary to declare emergency.

Thondaman thought Bandaranaike was vacillating. He called on the Governor General, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke and urged him to take quick action. Sir Oliver was very co-operative.

"I've already spoken to Banda", Sir Oliver said and added: "Banda is a little worried about handing power to the armed forces."

"Things are getting pretty bad. I hear the mob has started burning shops in the Pettah", Thondaman said.

Sir Oliver promised immediate action. He kept his word.

The disturbances spread to the hill country the next day. The government declared an emergency and the situation was brought under control within a few days.

Using the emergency, the government issued house detention orders against the Federal Party leaders, including Chelvanayakam. There were also a few detention orders against Sinhala extremists like K. M. P. Raj

ratna and F. R. Jayasuriya. Thondaman was unhappy about the house arrest of the Federal Party leaders.

"The Federal Party leaders did not instigate the riots. They were at receiving end. It is immoral to detain them", he said.

The riots made Bandaranaike feel guilty. He told his close associates that he had erred in tearing up the B-C pact. He wanted to make some amends. He moved the 'Tamil Language (special provisions) Bill in parliament and he offered to have the Federal Party parliamentarians then under detention escorted to parliament to participate in the debate. They refused.

The entire opposition, including the UNP, pleaded with the government to withdraw the detention orders. The CWC, though not in parliament, publicly supported opposition demand. The government refused to yield. The entire opposition boycotted the debate.

In the latter half of 1958 the language issue was sidelined by the Left-sponsored strikes and the VSSP-SLFP clashes. The two Left parties, LSSP and CP, organised a series of strikes which held the government and the country practically to ransom. The VSSP-SLFP clash was more dramatic. The group led by C. P. de Silva and Wimala Wijewardene kept attacking the VSSP group led by Philip Gunawardene. This ultimately led to the resignation of Philip Gunawardene and William de Silva from the Bandaranaike cabinet.

While the rightist elements in the SLFP were trying to isolate Bandaranaike from his leftist associates who pushed the adoption of progressive measures like nationalisation of the bus services, enactment of the Paddy Lands Act and the setting up of public corporations to administer public utility services, Thondaman gave his support to the leftists. He also nurtured his association with the FP.

Thondaman personally invited Chevanayakam and Vanniasingham to the Gampola sessions of the CWC on May 25, 1959. He also invited some government ministers. The ministers threatened to walk out if the Federal Party leaders addressed the meeting.

Thondaman made a blistering attack on the rightist-extremist section of the MEP in his presidential address at Perisundaram Nagar. He said: "It is known that the undoubtedly chauvinistic policy of the present government in regard to language has arisen through the political blackmail of certain reactionary circles which have now thought fit to align themselves with the Bandaranaike government".

He warned: "Unless the Prime Minister and his party and cabinet colleagues show positive evidence in the immediate future of a desire to fight these reactionary elements who dream of a Sinhalesed Ceylon, it is definite that a most unpleasant situation will arise in the country.

He continued: "I am firmly convinced that the difficulties of language can be resolved on the basis of a united democratic Ceylon. There is no need to divide Ceylon to solve the language question with justice and fairness. In fact, I would go further and say that a united Ceylon will be possible only if a democratic way is found for Sinhalese and Tamils to co-exist harmoniously in their country".

Thondaman said Bandaranaike government's language policy called for outright condemnation. Sinhalese and Tamils had lived together for centuries and both languages had been used. The struggle for independence from alien rule was on the basis of the unity of these communities and it was achieved on the understanding that both languages would receive equal treatment in a free Ceylon.

He said the Sinhala Only Act had hurt even those who welcomed his progressive foreign and social policies.

By this time the CWC had emerged as a strong plantation trade union and this intensified rivalry with the DWC. This rivalry took a peculiar turn in the last week of May 1959.

The ILO had invited a Ceylonese worker-delegate to attend its 40th sessions at Geneva. The labour ministry invited five trade unions to name a delegate. The CWC named Thondaman. The Democratic Workers' Congress, the Ceylon Trade Union Federation, the Ceylon Labour Union and the Lanka Estate Workers' Union jointly named Aziz. The labour ministry selected Thondaman

The four unions protested to Labour Minister T. B. Ilangaratne saying Thondaman represented only a small section of the Ceylonese workforce and that too, the plantation sector. Ilangaratne decided on Thondaman as the delegate and Aziz as the worker-advisor.

The four unions took up the matter with Prime Minister Bandaranaike invited the representatives of the four unions to meet him at Rosmead Place. Dr. Colvin R. de Silva and S. Chelliah represented the Lanka Estate Workers' Union; Pieter Keuneman and M. G. Mendis the Ceylon Trade Union Federation; Aziz and Velupillai the DWC and N. Sanmugathasan and S. Nadesan the Ceylon Labour Union. They argued the CWC was not fully representative of the workers in Ceylon; that a number of items in the ILO agenda deal with the industrial sector. Bandaranaike upheld the decision of minister Ilangaratne and said Aziz could go as an advisor. Aziz declined the offer.

Bandaranaike was essentially fair and just. His basic character was drawn out in this worker representative dispute. He had also by then, grown tired of being a captive of the Sinhala extremists. He was trying to extricate himself from their stranglehold when he was assassinated by Somarama thero on September 26, 1959.

For Thondaman, the slaying of Bandaranaike was a personal loss. He had struck up a close friendship with him. Thondaman found in Bandaranaike a liberal mind and reasonable character which he wanted to cultivate. But Bandaranaike failed to give any concrete shape to his liberal and democratic ideals. Thondaman still speaks of it as the tragedy of Bandaranaike and of the country. He fell captive to the Sinhala extremists and when he tried to get out of it they killed him.

A comic interlude followed the death of Bandaranaike. Dahanavake was made the Prime Minister and when other SLFPers tried to oppose him he sacked every one of them. Dahanayake then formed a new party called the LPP and dissolved parliament when he found his parliamentary support being eroded. He fixed the general election for March 1960.

During the period 1956-60 two important things were taking place which affected the CWC and Thondaman. The first was the slow pace of implementation of the

Citizenship Act. Thondaman charged in a press statement that the officials were wantonly delaying registration. In support of his charge he cited the decisions in the cases that went up to the Supreme Court and Privy Council.

In those cases the two appellate bodies had ruled that the men who administered the Act had misdirected themselves on questions of fact and law, consciously or unconsciously, in various ways and on various questions. A large number of them had shown bias.

Meanwhile, a statement by R. G. Senanayake, issued on October 26, 1958 annoyed Thondaman. S. G. Senanayake said the government would absorb only 150,000 Ceylon Indians and the balance would be sent to India.

Thondaman reacted angrily: "I must warn the MEP that any attempt to solve the problem of the stateless in a harsh, reactionary or inhuman manner will lead to grave consequences that will not be conducive to the progress and development of the country".

Bandaranaike aggravated the situation further with his explanation. He said: "What R. G. Senanayake had actually said was that only 150,000 would be registered under the Indian and Pakistani (Residents) Citizenship Act". His explanation was intended to save the face of LWC leader Aziz, who was supporting the MEP, but it actually put him in a tight spot.

The second development was the merger of the Congress organisation. The approaching March, 1960 election was one factor which prompted it. The other was the constant campaign by the Tamil papers, especially **Thinakaran**. Intermediaries approached P. T. Thanu Pillai, one of the founder-members of the CIC, to conduct the negotiations. After prolonged discussions a settlement was reached on December 23, 1959.

The merger was announced at a press conference. This writer attended it and was greeted by Thondaman who said "Come. Come. You wanted us to unite. We have decided to do it".

"Our members will not fight again", Aziz said.

The agreement was simple. The CWC would continue

to be the trade union wing. The DWC would be transformed into a political party named the Ceylon Democratic Congress. The CDC would nominate candidates for the 1960 March parliamentary elections. The agreement was signed by Thondaman, Somasundaram, Ramalingam and Ramanujam on behalf of the CWC and Aziz, Nair and P. S. V. Naidu on behalf of the DWC.

They issued a press statement which read: "We have been holding talks for the past few weeks to reconcile differences which have kept plantation workers divided. From today, December 23, 1959, the two congresses will merge into one, in order to serve the interests of the plantation community effectively and to take forward the struggle of the plantation worker with more vigour"

But that happy marriage did not last long.

CHAPTE 6

MAKING GOVERNMENTS

CWC - DWC unity brought back relative peace among estate workers. It also brought back Left influence from which the CWC had been trying to wriggle out during the split Aziz, a committed leftist with links with the leaning Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Movement, had always dragged the CWC (later the DWC) into the leftist fold. This had deprive Aziz's organisation of room for political manoeuvre.

At the 1960 general election on March 19, Thondaman managed to convince the CWC that it should contest as an independent entity while supporting the leftists. He contested the Nuwara Eliya seat and was defeated.

That election proudced a very tricky situation. The UNP won only 50 seats in the 161-member House of Representatives. The SLFP, headed by C. P. de Silva, won 45, the balance seats were won by smaller Parties — Federal Party-15; MEP, led by Philip Gunawardene-1 ; LSSP-10; LPP-4; CP-3; JVP2; Tamil Congress-1; and three small parties and Independents-10.

The Governir-General Sir Oliver, called on Dudley Senanayake to form the government. SLFP leaders met Sir Oliver and lodged their objection. Sir Oliver told them he was constitutionally bound to call the leader of the party which had obtained the highest number of seats to form the government. C. P. de Silva, who headed the SLFP delegation, countered this by saying that the Governor-General was duty bound to appoint one who could command the confidence of the House.

"Dudley says he can get the majority", Sir Oliver said.

De Silva challenged that. "The entire opposition is with us", he said.

"Including the Federal Party?" Sir Oliver asked.

"Including the Federal Party", De Silva replied and undertook to produce a written letter from Chelvanayakam.

The task of getting the Federal Party's support was assigned to Badiuddin Mahmud. He approached Thondaman who telephoned Chelvanayakam at Alfred Place. Mrs. Chelvanayakam said he was still at Kankesanthurai but was flying to Ratmalana that afternoon. Thondaman was also told that Chelvanayakam would go from the airport to E. G. P. Jayatilleke's house for a meeting with some UNP leaders. Thondaman sent Ramanujam to the airport to meet him.

As Chelvanayakam emerged from the airport building Ramanujam garlanded him.

"Sir, I am garlanding you on behalf of the CWC and its leader, Thondaman", Ramanujam announced.

Then he told Chelvanayakam that Thondaman wanted to see him urgently.

"Why does he want to meet me?", Chelvanayakam asked.

"He is waiting for you. He will tell you why", Ramanujam evaded the question.

Chelvanayakam was taken to the CWC office and Thondaman came down to greet him. As they climbed the creaky wooden steps Chelvanayakam asked: "Why have you brought me here?"

"You have surprise visitors", Thondaman replied,

Chelvanayakam was astounded to see Badiuddin there.

Thondaman explained the purpose of the meeting. Then Badiuddin said: "Sir, we have come to seek your support for the SLFP."

Thondaman said C. P. de Silva was prepared to revive

the B-C pact and even to give more power to the regional council. The UNP could not give more, He urged Chelvanayakam to accept the offer.

Chelvanayakam accepted and the Federal Party's support for the SLFP was won.

C. P. de Silva met Sir Oliver, but was told that the only course available to the SLFP was to defeat the government at the Throne Speech debate.

The Throne Speech was debated for three days, beginning March 20. When Chelvanayakam rose to speak on the final day the fate of the UNP government was sealed. Chelvanayakam bitterly attacked the UNP and J. R. Jayewardene in particular. He charged that Jayewardene, who led the Kandy march, was misleading the Sinhala people by saying federalism would lead to the division of the country.

He concluded: "The real enemy of the Tamil-speaking people is not the SLFP but the UNP. It was the UNP bhikkus who persuaded Mr. Bandaranaike to tear up the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact".

When the government was defeated on April 22, Dudley Senanayake summoned an emergency cabinet meeting that night. They considered the next step. Dudley wanted to call a general election. He argued that he would return with a bigger majority. Being in the government would give the UNP the advantage of using the state machinery. A section of the cabinet opposed it, arguing that the SLFP should be given an opportunity to rule with the help of the Federal Party. That would provide additional grist to the UNP propaganda mill. Dudley over-ruled that argument and fixed the election for July 1960.

Thondaman did not contest. He went along with Azis and decided to back the SLFP, which had elected Bandaranaike's widow, Sirima, as its leader. Sirima's entry and the SLFP's electoral pact with the LSSP and CP conclusively turned tables on the UNP. Sirima's public appearances and appeals moved a large section of the voters, especially women. The electoral pact banded together the anti-UNP forces. It was the second time that anti-UNP parties had got together; the first was in 1956.

The SLFP swept the polls, winning 75 seats against the UNP's 30. The score of the other parties was: FP-16, LSSP-12, CP-4, MEP-3, JVP-2, LPP-2, TC-1 and Independents-6.

Mrs. Bandaranaike was sworn in as Prime Minister and took her seat in the Senate. She relied heavily on Felix Dias Bandaranaike, who dominated the government. Thondaman was appointed a member of parliament on August 4, 1960, representing labour interests. S. D. Bandaranaike, the Gampaha MP, sent Mrs. Bandaranaike a telegram urging her not to nominate Thondaman to parliament.

The SLFP leaders began neglecting the Federal Party and Thondaman soon after they climbed to power. They ignored their promises to the Federal Party in March and launched the Sinhala Only implementation with vigour. Badiuddin, who was then Education Minister, took up the matter at a cabinet meeting in February 1961, but Felix (or FDB as he came to be known), who virtually ran the cabinet meeting laughed it off. "That promise was given in a completely different environment. Now we must not give room to the UNP to incite the Sinhala extremists" he said.

Thondaman told of this, got annoyed. He said: "First the husband, then the wife and the nephew have shown that they worry only about Sinhala extremists. They are not concerned about the Tamils and their feelings. One day the Sinhala race will have to pay for this."

The policy of appeasement which the SLFP leadership adopted towards the Sinhala extremists estranged both Federal Party launched a satyagraha movement in the the Federal Party and Thondaman. In February 1961, the northern and eastern provinces calling upon the government to keep its promises. Thousands of Tamil men, women and children sat opposite the kachcheries and other government offices singing religious songs. Leaders fasted in batches and many others joined the fast. At first they did not obstruct the work in government offices but as the government chose to ignore them, they expanded their satyagraha into a civil disobedience campaign.

On March 9, Thondaman and S. D. Bandaranaike, the MP who had objected to Thondaman being nominated,

travelled together to Jaffna by plane. They were met at Palali airport by A. Amirthalingam, who took them by car to the Jaffna kachcheri. The car was flying the Federal Party flag and its number plate carried the Tamil 'Shri'.

As he neared the kachcheri, Thondaman got off and walked along the kachcheri-Nallur road. He was struck by the determination of the satyagrahis. He was moved. Addressing them he said: "I came here to see the satyagraha for myself. I am struck by your discipline. I am struck by your determination. Discipline and determination are the two essentials for any movement to succeed. I am sure you will succeed in your struggle".

He and S. D. Bandaranaike held talks with the FP leaders. When he returned to Colombo he had a meeting with the Prime Minister Mrs. Bandaranaike listened patiently to his account of the satyagraha and directed him to talk to Felix. Felix however, was unsympathetic. He told Thondaman that the government was not in a position to yield.

"Think of the Sinhala reaction if we give in", Felix said.

"But think of the Tamil reaction if you take a hard line", Thondaman countered.

Felix said the government had to worry more about the Sinhala reaction.

Thondaman warned: "You cannot ignore the feelings of a community for long".

The Federal Party launched its own postal service on April 14. The government reacted by imposing a state of emergency and ordered the army to clear the satyagrahis from the kachcheri. The FP leaders were also arrested. A curfew was imposed in the northern and eastern provinces, for the first time in their history.

Thondaman protested to the government and told the press that the induction of the army in a purely a political conflict was unwise. "Political solutions should be found for political problems. Resorting to armed action bespeaks political barrenness".

He blamed Felix for what he termed 'military adventurism'. He described Felix as "immature and power drunk".

He summoned the CWC working committee for an emergency session on April 24 which came out with a four-point formula for solution of the language issue:

1. Tamil should be recognised as the language of the national minority and the language of administration of the northern and eastern provinces;
2. The Language of the Courts Bill should be amended to permit the use of Tamil for the purpose of record;
3. Regulations tabled under the Tamil Language Special Provisions Act be withdrawn and a fresh set of regulation worked out;
4. Provision for Tamils living outside the north and east to transact business with the government Tamil.

Thondaman met with Mrs. Bandaranaike on May 28, to discuss the Tamil language issue, but Mrs. Bandaranaike was adamant about Sinhala Only.

Thondaman's relations with Mrs. Bandaranaike and the SLFP government soured further when, on October 20, 1961, he flouted the government whip and voted against the Immigrants and Emigrants (Amendment) Bill. He also voted with the Federal Party on an amendment they moved to the Throne Speech.

These two instances created parliamentary history. There had been no instance since independence of a nominated MP voting against the government. E. F. N. Gratien had once abstained during voting; and was immediately appointed a judge of the Supreme Court, thus forcing him to resign his parliamentary seat. A convention had been created that nominated MPs always voted with the government, even though they might speak against a particular bill.

While voting with the opposition, Thondaman made two things clear. First, he supported the government in its attempt to curb sly entry; what he opposed was the

inhuman manner in which illicit immigrants were treated. Secondly, he made it clear that his first obligation was to his people, the Ceylon Indians. He had accepted government nomination but he was not prepared to be a 'yes man' — especially not in matters which affected the Ceylon Indians.

While this estrangement with the SLFP was taking place, the Thondaman-Aziz merger was also cracking up. The rift between the two sections came into the open again during the 1961 presidential election of the CWC. Aziz wanted Thondaman not to contest. Thondaman refused.

Thondaman won that election. It aggravated the rift and it was clear that the two sections could not continue as one organisation. The parting of the ways came in April 1962. The Ceylon Workers' Congress has been under Thondaman's leadership since then; the Democratic Workers' Congress under Aziz.

This in a way helped the Indian community. The dogmatic socialist group which was instrumental in getting the Indians to support the leftists and the Left-leaning SLFP, had now got out of the CWC. This gave Thondaman more flexibility to negotiate with the more pliable UNP. From the 1947 election to July 1960 election the CWC had consistently supported the leftists and the SLFP. In the elections of 1965, 1970, 1977 and 1989 it supported the UNP.

When his relation with the SLFP deteriorated, Thondaman was subjected to a lot of pinpricks from the government. In 1962 the food department refused to issue ration books to stateless persons unless they proved continuous residence since 1949. Thondaman took up the matter with the Minister of Trade, Commerce, Food and Shipping, T. B. Ilangaratne who revoked the order. Ilangaratne directed that ration books should be issued to all who had possessed them earlier.

But in 1964, when food department officials stopped the issue of Maldivian fish to estate workers, Ilangaratne refused to help. Thondaman took up the matter with Finance Minister Dr. N. M. Perera. He refused too.

The SLFPers also took to baiting Thondaman. In October 1962, the border clash between India and China

took place. The Chinese army had occupied large tracts of disputed territory in the Himalayas. R. G. Senanayake, made use of that to hit at Thondaman. He proposed that "General Thunder Man should lead his million strong army to fight the Chinese in the North-East Frontier of India".

When he read that report in the 'Observer', Thondaman rang the editor and asked for right of reply. It was granted and he replied:

"Sena-nayake means commander-in-chief of the army. So my good friend R. G. is better qualified for the post he has offered me. As for going back to the motherland, his ancestors came here before mine, so he should be the first to go to the defence of the land of his ancestors".

In another incident the MP for Welimada, K. M. P. Rajaratne, in the House of Representatives on March 22, 1963, charged that Thondaman had given Mrs. Ilangaratne, wife of the minister, a gold chain worth Rs. 20,000. When he heard of it Thondaman replied in the House that the charge was false and demanded an unqualified apology. Ilangaratne denied it and invited Rajaratne to bring the matter to Bribery Commissioner's attention.

Thondaman in his speech, said: "Statements of this nature, unworthy of a member of parliament, cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. Mr. Rajaratne is quite capable of making irresponsible charges. He has been charging about like the bull in the (Red) China shop. I am now going to take the bull by the horns".

Rajaratne: "I made the charge when Mr. Ilangaratne was not only in parliament but actually on his feet. If my allegation was false, surely it was for Mr. Ilangaratne to deny it, not for Mr. Thondaman to take up cudgels with me".

Again, on October 19, Rajaratne raised two questions in parliament. The first was about Thondaman's visit to India earlier that month. Ramaiah, Thondaman's secretary, had told the Exchange Controller, Rasiyah, that Thondaman was going to see his relatives on a pre-paid ticket. Thondaman had told the defence ministry that he was attending a trade union conference in India.

Minister Ilangaratne replied that he would hold a full inquiry.

The second question was about Ramaiah's temporary residence permit. Rajaratne said the permit had expired and asked why he was not arrested and expatriated. Felix, R. Dias Bandaranaike, acting Minister for Defence, said it was physically impossible to apprehend everyone, but they would make every effort to catch Ramaiah.

Rajaratne's anger was the result of two events which had also annoyed the government. The first was Thondaman's presidential address at the 19th session of the CWC at Rajalingam Nagar in Hatton. The offending section of the speech was: "While we welcome any moral support in our struggle for citizenship rights from whatever quarter it comes, we consider that any negotiation between the Government of India and our government regarding the political and other rights of these workers (plantation workers) is derogatory to their dignity as human beings, particularly when their representatives are not parties to such negotiations".

He went on: "What is even more sinister is that as the years went by in the last decade, the technicalities demanded by administrative officials have become more and more unreasonable".

The second 'provocation' was his meeting Nehru. Thondaman had met Nehru on October 4 and discussed with him the question of securing the right to citizenship by Ceylonese of Indian origin who had been classed by Ceylon as stateless persons. He told Nehru of the misery and frustration estate Tamils encountered and added: "Those workers were born in Ceylon, will work and die there. That being the case, no wrong can go on for long".

He also informed Nehru of Ceylon government's decision to stop employing stateless persons in government service. Nehru was distressed. He assured Thondaman that he would try to help.

"There was some talk in Colombo of a coming deal with India about sharing the stateless persons", Thondaman told Nehru.

"No such nonsense with me. I won't agree to any horse deal", Nehru promised and told him that such a

suggestion was made by Dudley Senanayake a few years earlier when he met him in London during Queen Elizabeth's coronation which he and Dudley attended.

That was in 1953. Dudley had a long meeting with Nehru. During the discussion Dudley asked: "Why do you not agree to the repatriation of some of these people? Why do you not take back some of these people?"

Dudley suggested that India take back 300,000 of the Indian Tamils and offered to grant citizenship to the balance. Nehru declined to consider the offer saying that he was opposed to any compulsory repatriation. "It should be purely voluntary and we are prepared to take back those who are willing to return", Nehru said.

Nehru related that offer to Thondaman and assured him that India was ready to take back some but the return should be voluntary. He promised to consult the CWC in all future negotiations.

Gundavia who was present during the meeting took down notes of the conversation and, it was that note that made Shastri to a deal with Mrs. Bandaranaike. Sirima-Shastri talks began at New Delhi, on October 24, 1964. Mrs. Bandaranaike did not consult the CWC. She also refused to grant permission to Thondaman and other CWC leaders to travel to New Delhi to assist the Indian government. Travel curbs were then on force and government's permission was needed to travel abroad. Thondaman.

At the talks Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, who succeeded Nehru, was very accommodative and tried to please Ceylon which he called "our small neighbour". Mrs. Bandaranaike drove a hard bargain making full use of Shastri's magnificence. She said Ceylon being a small country could only absorb a small number and agreed to keep 300,000 and asked India to take the balance. Shastri agreed to take back 525,000. This left a balance of 150,000 which they agreed to settle later.

The 10-clause agreement said the objective was to end statelessness; Ceylon to grant citizenship to 300,000 of the total 975,000; India to accept 525,000 and the status of the balance 150,000 to be decided later; the repatriation to take place in 15 years; Ceylon to grant citizenship keeping pace with the number repatriated: the assets the

repatriates take with them should not be less than Rs. 4,000. The agreement was signed on October 30.

Thondaman was angry about the agreement. He called the pact a 'horse deal' and said India had no right to negotiate the fate of Ceylon Indians without consulting their representatives. He also accused Mrs. Bandaranaike of conducting negotiations behind his back.

Mrs. Bandaranaike also reacted with anger. On her triumphant return from Delhi, she informed parliament that the registered Ceylon Indians would be placed in a separate electoral register. This was a proposal introduced earlier by Sir John, but condemned as retrograde by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, and dropped.

The travel curb was an issue on which Thondaman had been warring with the government from May that year. The curb was introduced as a foreign exchange saver. But persons with air tickets sent from abroad were permitted to travel. Thondaman had got a ticket from the ILO to attend a meeting of the Asian Advisory Committee at Geneva. He wanted to leave on May 24, for the meeting scheduled for May 29; and he wanted to visit India and other places on the way. He furnished his application to N. Q. Dias the Permanent Secretary of the Defence Minister on May 20. Dias telephoned him that permission to deviate from his route would not be granted.

"Why?", demanded Thondaman.

Dias replied: "Mr. Thondaman, you might speak against the government when you are abroad".

Thondaman took up that matter in parliament. The travel curb, he said, was an unnecessary interference in the fundamental right of free travel.

He also charged that the law was not being implemented uniformly. Dr. Colvin R. de Silva and Leslie Gunewardene were permitted to travel without any hindrance. He asked whether that was because the LSSP had joined the government.

The LSSP had joined the government on June 11, 1964 and three leaders of that party were appointed ministers, Dr. N. M. Perera became Finance Minister, Cholmondeley Goonewardene, Minister of Public Works and Anil Moone-

singhe Minister of Communications. Mrs. Bandaranaike decided to take them into the government because of the deteriorating political and economic situation. The LSSP leaders made statement that they were joining the coalition "for the progress of socialism".

The coalition again brought into the open the conflicts within the SLFP. The group led by C. P. de Silva was unhappy about the coalition and the opposition was doing its utmost to exploit all possible divisions within the government ranks.

One such attempt occurred during the budget debate on August 18, 1964. There were several motions to cut the Prime Minister's vote and one of them was by Dahanayake and Keuneman. They had moved for a cut of Rs. 10 in the Prime Minister's vote. They said the travel curb was unjustifiable and unworkable and since the Prime Minister has taken full responsibility for its introduction she had earned the condemnation of the House.

When voting time arrived the House was depleted. Being a Monday, most of the MPs had not returned from their electorates. It seemed the opposition could win the day Dahanayake rushed in and out of the chamber coming the lobbies in search of opposition MPs, but could find none. His last hope was Thondaman, a victim of the travel curb.

When the Speaker put the motion to vote, Dahanayake asked for a division by name. When the Clerk of the House (now Secretary-General) called the names, Thondaman voted with the government. That was the decisive vote in favour of the government. It saved the Prime Minister's vote in the House. The government defeated the opposition 17-16.

Disappointed by this defeat, Dahanayake shouted aloud: "The government has won by Thondaman's 'hora' vote. Shame! Shame!".

But on December 3, the same year, Thondaman's vote brought the government down. It happened over the Press Bill.

The press, especially the Lake House group of papers, had mounted an intense campaign against the coalition,

especially the LSSP. This annoyed Dr. N. M. Perera. He persuaded Mrs. Bandaranaike to take over the Lake House Group and sell its shares to the public. The first draft was prepared in the last week of August.

Thondaman welcomed the idea of breaking the monopoly and broadbasing ownership, but "any legislation in this connection must ensure that free, independent, democratic newspapers should be able to flourish and reflect all shades of opinion", he said in a press statement on August 29.

The form the bill took and the government decision to take over Lake House distressed Thondaman. On October 8 he said he had decided to oppose the Press Bill. "It is not the proper remedy for shortcomings of the press", he told a CWC meeting at the Kandy town hall.

He added: "Freedom of expression and constructive criticism are the necessary ingredients of democracy. Marxists would consider press control one of their greatest triumphs, but they will be the first to suffer by the take-over".

The government members launched an attack on Thondaman. The Minister of Local Government, A. P. Jayasuriya, said at an SLFP public meeting in Nuwara Eliya: "Mr. Thondaman is only concerned about his own interests. He is a reactionary and an imperialist".

The LSSP, through its Lanka Estate Workers' Union, mounted a campaign to discredit Thondaman by calling him an estate owner. To that Thondaman replied: "Some say I am an estate owner and I am incapable of watching the interests of estate workers. There is no contradiction or conflict of interests in this. My roles of estate owner and trade unionist have nothing to do with each other. I separate my estates from my trade unionism".

The government introduced the Press Bill in parliament on November 26. The owners of Lake House and the UNP organised a mass meeting at the town hall. There was also a procession of bhikkus. The mahanayake theeras of the three chapters issued statements condemning the take over of Lake House. Tension was building up. The government dissolved parliament and summoned it for December 1, to get over some of the procedural hitches it faced. The opposition moved an amendment to the Throne

Speech which was put to the vote on December 3. At voting time 14 members of the SLFP defied the party whip and voted with the opposition. The group's leader C. P. de Silva made a statement explaining their action.

He said: "It is my painful duty to do so in all responsibility, that from what I have known, what I have heard and what I have seen in the inner councils of the coalition government of Mrs. Bandaranaike, our nation is now being inexorably pushed towards unadulterated totalitarianism".

Mrs. Bandaranaike who was present in the House called the cross-over "a stab in the back".

Thondaman abstained. It caused the defeat of the government. The government mustered 73 votes as against the opposition's 74. If Thondaman had voted with the government, there would have been a tie and with the Speaker's vote the government would have survived.

Mrs. Bandaranaike clung to power for two days. She was under great pressure not to resign. Among them was the voice of Aziz. He told Mrs. Bandaranaike: "Madam! please look at the arithmetic of the situation. If we can get the Federal Party's support you need not resign."

Mrs. Bandaranaike: Will they support us?

Aziz: We can talk to them and see.

Mrs. Bandaranaike: Who is to talk to them?

Aziz: Surely you have someone who can talk to them?

Mrs. Bandaranaike: We don't have anyone. Can you try?

Aziz approached M. Tiruchelvam. But Tiruchelvam told him that they had already committed themselves to support the UNP. Thondaman had worked out that deal. Mrs. Bandaranaike handed over her resignation two days later and called for a general election.

The general election was held on March 22, 1965. Thondaman and the Federal Party supported the UNP. Thondaman had real difficulty in convincing Tamil youth

on the plantations to vote for the UNP. The Indian Tamil community had got used to voting anti-UNP ever since elections were held in Ceylon. They had always identified themselves with the Left. Thondaman tackled the problem cleverly. He told them to vote as they preferred — and then asked whether it was possible for them to vote for the coalition.

At the CWC working committee meeting he said: "I feel a change of government will improve the situation. I also feel we must help to prevent the country from drifting into dictatorship".

Thondaman did not blindly offer his help to the UNP. He told the UNP leadership that it should quicken the granting of citizenship to the stateless. He said the CWC was opposed to the placing of registered citizens in a separate register. He was associated with the negotiations between the FP and the government.

Dudley Senanayake and Chelvanayakam met on March 24, 1965, at Dr. M. V. P. Peris's house and discussed matters relating some problems over which the Tamil-speaking people were concerned, and Dudley agreed to take action on four main areas.

First, Action will be taken early under the Tamil Language Special Provisions Act to make provision for Tamil to be the language of administration and of record in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Dudley also explained that it was the policy of his party that a Tamil speaking person should be entitled to transact business in Tamil throughout the Island.

Second, Dudley stated that it was the policy of his party to amend the Language of the Courts Act to provide for legal proceedings in the Northern and Eastern Provinces to be conducted and recorded in Tamil.

Third, Action will be taken to establish District Councils in Ceylon vested with powers over subjects to be mutually agreed upon between the two leaders. It was agreed, however, that the government should have power under the law to give directions to such councils in the national interest.

Fourth, The Land Development Ordinance will be amended to provide that all citizens of Ceylon be entitled to the allotment of land under the Ordinance. Dudley

further agreed that in the granting of land under colonisation schemes the following priorities be observed in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

- (a) Land in the Northern and Eastern Provinces should in the first instance be granted to landless persons in the district;
- (b) Secondly to Tamil speaking persons resident in the Northern and Eastern provinces and;
- (c) Thirdly to other citizens in Ceylon, preference being given to Tamil citizens in the rest of the island.

The UNP won 66 seats as against the SLFP's 41. The FP won 14, LSSP-10, SLFSP-2, a splinter group of the SLFP-5, CP-TC-3 and other small parties-3. Leader Dudley Senanayake formed a national government with the help of the FP, TC and LPP. Tiruchelvam was appointed Minister of Local Government and Thondaman and V. Annamalai nominated to the House of Representatives. S. Nadesan QC., and R. Jesuthasan were appointed to the Senate.

Thondaman had moved right to the centre of Ceylon's political stage on May day of 1965, he was the main object of attack.

CHAPTER 7

'HOWTHA MAN THONDA MAN'

The combined May Day procession of the coalition parties, SLFP, LSSP and CP, wended its way along the dusty Colombo streets in 1965, shouting the slogan 'Howtha Man Thonda Man'. They also shouted that Dudley taking orders from him. Thondaman had been aloft a full-sized cut-out of Thondaman with puny Dudley taking orders from him. Thondaman had been singled out for attack.

At the meeting that followed at Galle Face green, speaker after speaker attacked Thondaman. Their cry was that the country was being sold to him and that he should not be allowed to dictate terms. Thondaman was saddened by this development.

He told the CWC's 21st annual sessions in mid-May: "All these cries are being raised in an endeavour to fan racial flames and communal passions, regardless of the consequences in this sacred land which has been torn by strife since 1956 and is now hoping to heal its wounds and begin a new life".

Thondaman added: "I am not surprised at these racial and communal cries from the SLFP, because that is their stock in trade. I am pained that leftist parties like the LSSP which had espoused minority rights in the past, have joined in playing the communal drum".

Thondaman also told the press "The vadai and thosai" slogans of Mrs. Bandaranaike and N.M. are only signs of their utter folly which defeated their government. They must remember that the Tamils of Ceylon are not slaves as Sirimavo says. Even the last King of Kandy was a South Indian and Mrs. Bandaranaike's grandfather, Ratwatta signed his name in Tamil".

Despite these harsh attacks and retorts, the coalition leaders were in for a surprise on September 26,

1965, they were all gathered at Horagolla and Mrs. Bandaranaike was about to perform the religious ceremonies. In walked Thondaman, behind a wreath carried by two of his trade union officials. At the end of the ceremony, Mrs. Bandaranaike thanked Thondaman for coming. He replied: "That's my duty to a genuine friend and a leader who tried to be fair to all people".

Yet the opposition kept up its pressure on Thondaman. In January 1966, they floated a rumour that Thondaman was going to quit the government over a dispute about the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Bill. They said he would vote against the government motion on January 10 to take over Private Members' Day for government business. When the motion was put to the House, 72 MPs voted for and 40 against. Thondaman voted with the government.

Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake: Where are your cross-overs?

Opposition leaders smiled back feebly. When the opposition stood up to vote Tamil Congress MP, M. Sivathamparam (then in the government) asked: Where is A. L. A. Majeed? Majeed was an SLFP MP but had voted with the government.

The House then debated the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Bill which S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike had been very anxious to enact and which was then opposed by the UNP.

The SLFP together with LSSP had organised a demonstration, whose members to march to parliament, then situated at Galle Face. Dudley was informed that Buddhist priests were leading it and he began to panic. J. R. Jayewardene, then Minister of State, took a strong stand and said the demonstrators had to be dispersed even if it needed the use of force. The police opened fire at the demonstrators and a Buddhist priest was killed.

Thondaman also persuaded Dudley to pass the Indo-Ceylon (Implementation) Bill. It was passed after a stormy debate. The opposition fought hard to prevent inclusion of the clause that Ceylon citizenship should be granted to stateless persons without waiting for the repatriation of those to whom Indian citizenship had been granted. The earlier arrangement was to grant Ceylon citizenship to four persons after seven to whom

Indian citizenship had been granted were repatriated.

After the bill was passed by parliament Thondaman told the CWC working committee: "The long fight is over. Thanks to the national government, a cherished and inviolable right, embodied in the Charter of Human Rights to which Ceylon has fully subscribed, has at last been implemented. Soon the stigma of statelessness suffered by the people of Indian origin will be removed for all time".

But Thondaman had failed to take into account the slow moving Lankan bureaucracy. Two years later he told the 23rd session of the CWC, held at Ramanujam Nagar, in Hatton: "After nearly two years I am compelled to state categorically that the provision is not being implemented by the government. Even the legal obligation to maintain the ratio 4-7 is not being discharged. Every kind of obstacle is put in the way of applicants. The government accepted that the officials would be sent to the estates, but the officials are asking the applicants to come to Colombo".

While the citizenship, language and colonisation issues were dragging on in the political arena, Thondaman won two significant victories in the trade union field which strengthened the economic power of the Ceylon Indians and widened the trade union base of the CWC.

The first was the signing of the Collective Agreement with Ceylon Estate Employers' Federation (CEEFF) on April 24, 1967, in the air-conditioned auditorium of the Planters' Association headquarters in Colombo. Thondaman signed on behalf of the CWC and P. R. Walton, Deputy President of the CEEFF for the employers. That was the first collective agreement between estate workers and employers in 150-year-history of the plantation industry in Sri Lanka.

The agreement was intended to settle a long simmering wage dispute. Wages had not been raised since 1955. Under this agreement, wages were raised by 10 cents in all categories.

Thondaman also cleverly incorporated a clause permitting the management to deduct trade union fees from the pay roll and remit them to the unions. That was based on the American system of 'check-off'. It was a first in employer-employee relations in Sri Lanka.

The second victory was the one-week token strike protesting against the devaluation allowance not being granted to plantation workers. It had been a long standing practice in Sri Lanka to ignore the plantation workers whenever a wage hike was given to the public service and industrial sector. The Dudley Senanayake government followed that practice. When it devalued the rupee, it granted a special allowance to cushion employees from increased prices. But the plantation sector was ignored. The CWC wrote to the CEEF urging a similar award, but the Federation pleaded inability to pay, saying the plantation industry was facing severe economic difficulties.

The CWC executive committee met on December 12, 1967 and passed a resolution that the CWC's persistent efforts since 1955 to improve the wages of plantation workers had been opposed by the employers, while public service and industry had enjoyed several increases. The resolution announced a one-week token strike, beginning December 20.

The CEEF reacted angrily. In a letter addressed to Thondaman, it said the decision to resort to a token strike violated clause 8(b) of the Collective Agreement signed under the Industrial Disputes Act and was tantamount to a repudiation of that agreement.

The CWC replied on December 15, denying that the token strike amounted to any such violation. The new pay demand it said, was the result of the new situation created by the government's financial policy and the strike decision was taken after all avenues of negotiation had been exhausted.

Meanwhile, the LSSP, CP, SLFP and DWC also decided to call out their members on December 20, demanding a wage increase. This made the strike appear political and Dudley Senanayake reacted sharply. He declared a state of emergency and mobilised the army and volunteer reserves to prevent the breakdown of law and order.

On the evening of December 19, the Prime Minister's Secretary, Bradman Weerakoon, telephoned Thondaman. "The Prime Minister wants to see you at 6.30 p.m. Sir", he said. Thondaman agreed to meet Dudley. They met at Woodlands. Dudley's private residence. Dudley looked somewhat annoyed.

He said: "So, you are launching a token strike tomorrow?"

Thodaman explained the reasons for the strike. Dudley was not in a mood to listen. He was troubled that Thondaman had created a situation for the opposition to exploit. As the discussions proceeded, Dudley said sternly: "Mr. Thondaman, I am not going to permit this strike. I will not even agree to a wage rise. If I give the estate workers a wage increase I must be in a position to answer the people".

"I understand", Thondaman replied equally stern. "The strike will take place tomorrow and it will not be withdrawn until a wage rise is given. If I don't get them a wage increase, I must answer my people".

Dudley was angry. He shouted: "If you don't withdraw the strike I will have to arrest you using the emergency."

Thondaman answered back. "You can arrest me. I am not worried about that. I am prepared to be arrested. But beware! You will not be able to control my people after that."

The meeting ended and Thodaman went back to the CWC headquarters to finalise arrangements for the next day's strike.

So, on December 20 the CWC called out its entire workforce of about 600,000. The opposition parties called out their workers too. The entire tea and rubber trade was paralysed. Two days later Dudley called Thondaman for negotiations and offered a 30-cent increase in the daily wage. Thondaman accepted it. Both men came out of the Prime Minister's office to make this announcement to waiting pressmen.

"We have reached an agreement," Dudley said and added: "Thondaman will announce the agreement."

Thondaman said: "The government has offered a 30-cent increase in the daily wage. This amount is totally inadequate, but the CWC has decided to accept it because it is satisfied that the government has accepted the principle that what applies to industrial workers applies to the plantation workers too. The CWC has now decided to call off the strike tomorrow."

That created an interesting situation. Opposition plantation trade unions were left in lurch. When pressmen informed Dr. N.M. Perera of the new development he was infuriated. Asked whether he would continue the strike he replied: "Who is concerned with what Thondaman is doing? We will go ahead with the strike".

When pressmen relayed this to Thondaman he quipped. "If he does not care about what I do why did they fix the strike to coincide with mine?"

When Thondaman entered parliament after his meeting with Dudley, government members gave him a hero's welcome. They said Thondaman had neatly foxed the opposition. A government member commented: "Poor Aziz. He has now caught the tiger's tail:

The opposition strike crumbled in two days.

Although Thondaman had succeeded in the trade union field, he was becoming disillusioned in the political sphere. Not much progress had been made on the citizenship issue and with language too, Dudley was dragging his feet.

Regulation under the Tamil Language (Special Provision) Act had been passed, but were not administered with any vigour. Likewise the Dudley government enacted the Indo-Ceylon Agreement (Implementation) Act in 1967, but was lukewarm in implementing it.

The FP too, was getting tired of Dudley's procrastination. The Thirukoneswaram issue finally forced the FP to break off with Dudley's national government. Tiruchelvam had been pressing the government to declare Thirukoneswaram, the historic temple within Trincomalee Fort a sacred city. Dudley was postponing a decision owing to pressure from the Sinhala people.

When the FP pressed Dudley to implement his promises he wrote to Chelvanayakam saying that he was unable to implement them as there was opposition. He was prepared to resign.

Chelvanayakam told Dudley that his decision to resign would not help the Tamil people. He said the only way out was for the Tamil people to look after themselves.

In 1968 Tiruchelvam handed over to the temple a portion of the land with Fort Fredrick. The Sinhalese of Trincomalee objected to this. Dudley was annoyed and summoned Tiruchelvam, reprimanding him for acting without his permission. Tiruchelvam argued that as Minister of Local Government he was the final authority on any decision about handing over the land. This led to a heated argument. Tiruchelvam resigned his portfolio and the Federal Party quit the government.

Dudley governed the full term of five years and held elections on May 27, 1970. The CWC executive committee met on May 11 and decided to support the UNP. The resolution called upon all plantation workers and people who had the interests of plantation workers at heart to vote for UNP candidates under the leadership of Dudley Senanayake. The resolution added that meanwhile they pledged to continue the fight for the rights of plantation Tamils.

The resolution stated that the CWC had found both the UNP and the SLFP wanting in regard to the union's major demands. But the UNP had maintained peace and order during its rule and remained firmly committed to the democratic form and practice. It had negotiated with trade union representatives which the SLFP refused to do; so the UNP looked better.

The United Front, comprising the SLFP, LSSP and CP swept the polls, winning an unprecedented 116 seats. Thondaman was out of parliament for seven years. The CWC immediately congratulated the SLFP on its victory and Thondaman personally congratulated LSSP leader Dr. Colvin R. de Silva on his appointment as the Minister of Plantations.

V. K. Vellayan, who was then leading the breakaway National Union of Workers, criticised the CWC's decision to support the UNP in the election. He wrote to Thondaman saying "your misguided and bankrupt leadership has brought the Indian plantation workers to grief". He also decried Thondaman's leadership as a "self-glorifying leadership" and said a neutral stand in the 1970 elections would have benefitted the plantation Tamils.

The period 1970-77 was the most difficult for the CWC and Thondaman personally. It was the period of the land reform law and over a thousand acres of Thondaman's well kept tea lands were taken over by the state.

These included the estates in Nuwara Eliya, Kandy and Meegoda.

Thondaman was not crestfallen however. He redoubled his activities. In this period was laid the foundation for some of his later achievements. On September 5, 1971, the CWC executive committee decided to present the Ceylon Estate Employers' Federation (CEEF) with three demands: a guaranteed monthly wage of Rs. 90 for 25 days of work; equal wages for females; and one month's wage as gratuity for every year of service.

Thondaman immediately wrote to the CEEF and asked that their demand be met before December 31, 1971. He tried to exploit every possible avenue of support for the three demands.

He attended the meeting of 12 estate unions convened by C. V. Velupillai, Vice-President of the National Union of Workers, held on October 25, 1971, to discuss common problems. The other unions attending Planter Workers Union, that meeting were the DWC, Lanka Estate Workers' Union, Ceylon United National Workers' Union, Sri Lanka Independent Estate Workers' Union, Hill Country Workers' Union, Ilankai Tholilalar Kalagham, Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union, Socialist Workers' Congress and Ceylon Estate Staff Union. Thondaman placed the CWC's three demands before them and persuaded them to adopt the demands in principle.

He also wrote to the Finance Minister, Dr. N. F. Perera, seeking his support for a collective agreement incorporating these three demands. He said the three demands were based on the collective agreement of industrial workers. He pointed out that nearly half a million workers backed the CWC demand.

Thondaman instructed all 45 district committees to send telegrams to the CEEF, backing the three demands. They did so. The CWC also instructed its membership stay away from work on November 3, to press their claim. That day was declared 'Demand Day'. The entire CWC membership struck work that day.

Thondaman was invited by the Labour Minister, Michael Siriwardene, for a meeting on November 29, 1971. It was a very frank meeting. Thondaman told the minister that the cost of living had escalated, but instead of grant-

ing relief the government had introduced a 25-cent levy for medical treatment in government hospitals.

Siriwardene was very sympathetic. He arranged a meeting with the CEEF, where it was decided to examine the monthly wage and other two demands.

While the talks were on, the CWC made another demand. The press dubbed it the "clocking time dispute". It started in June 1972, when the CWC informed the CEEF that it would like working hours on the estates to be revised, to allow more time for women workers to attend to their family chores. The CWC asked for a meeting with the CEEF on July 11.

The CWC also issued an ultimatum to the CEEF that its membership would be instructed to report for work only at 9 a.m. from August 1, 1972, unless the federation agreed to this demand. The ultimatum was accompanied by a note from Thondaman that the colonial practice of treating estate workers as slaves should end.

The CWC and the CEEF met on July 11. Their talks lasted two hours. Thondaman, who led the CWC delegation, argued that the custom of working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. severely affected the physical and social well being of the workers. He said this was borne out by the high maternal and infant mortality rates on plantations.

He argued that although the law had laid down a working period of nine hours, a system had evolved which allowed the men to knock off once they completed a set task. That practice should be recognised by the employers as an industrial practice and extended to the women—they were required to perform a job which was both time-and-piece-rated; and that, too, arbitrarily imposed by employers.

He argued that re-adjustment of working hours for women workers had become urgent. Employers were denying work to pluckers even if they got a few minutes late, notwithstanding the distances they had to walk and the absence of minimum facilities in the way of latrines and water service. Taken together, with the cutting down of working days made available to estate workers, the situation could no longer be tolerated, Thondaman said.

The CEEF delegation was not agreeable to this. Any

change in clocking time would affect production and render the plantation industry unviable, they said. The talks broke down.

On July 15, Thondaman notified the CEEF that if no agreement was reached the workers would report for work at 9 a.m., beginning August 1, 1972. The CEEF wrote back asking for an extension. Thondaman refused.

The government took this as a challenge to its authority and persuaded the pro-government unions to oppose it. Four unions, the DWC, LSSP oriented Lanka Estate Workers' Union, the Communist Party-controlled United Plantation Workers' Union, and the SLFP-led Sri Lanka Estate Workers Union opposed the change in clocking hours.

With the estate unions divided, things began to get hot. Tension mounted, especially in the Hatton district. The police were ordered by the government to end a mobile patrol. Labour Minister Siriwardene asked Thondaman to meet him at the ministry on July 26. At that meeting Thondaman told Siriwardene that he was always willing to compromise, but the CEEF was always difficult or adamant. "You suggest a compromise, I will get the CWC to accept it", he said. Siriwardene was pleased. He said: "Thonda! You want your people to report for work at 9 a.m. and the current practice is 7 a.m. Why not come to a compromise at 8 a.m.". Thondaman grabbed it. "I agree. Will you get the CEEF to agree?" he asked. Siriwardene undertook to do so.

Thondaman seized on that favourable change. "I want your assistance to resolve two other matters", he said. "Tell me. I'll help if I can", the minister replied.

At tea, Thondaman said: "The employers are penalising workers who report even a few minutes late. The agreement must state that the management should not do this".

"Fair enough", Siriwardene replied.

Thondaman also got Siriwardene to agree to his suggestion that the CEEF should discuss the monthly wage and other demands with the CWC within three months.

The CEEF was not happy about this 8 O'clock compromise. Its secretary, Roland Wijewickrema, reacted: "The question has to be considered in its entirety, taking into consideration the effect the change in clocking time will have on the different plantations". The plantation management lobby and the influential pro-government estate unions got the cabinet to reject the labour minister's 8 o'clock compromise formula.

Thondaman issued a press statement defending the minister's formula. He said it was in accordance with the government's policy of advancing the cause of labour. And the CWC ordered its membership to report for work at 8 o'clock.

While this trade union struggle was on, an important political exercise was taking place in Colombo. The government was drawing up a new constitution by forming a constitutional assembly comprising members of parliament. Thondaman, though not a member of parliament, tried to influence the constitution-making process through the press. He got the CWC to pass a resolution calling upon the assembly to incorporate a workers' charter in the constitution. The CWC also wanted a fundamental rights chapter included in the constitution.

Thondaman sought to meet Mrs. Bandaranaike to press for inclusion of the language and fundamental rights chapters in the new constitution. But he was prevented from meeting her. In 1977, after the election, he told the press that he had been able to meet Mrs. Bandaranaike only outside Sri Lanka, and she was very good to him.

"I wanted to meet Mrs. Bandaranaike to impress on her the need to embody the rights of stateless persons in the constitution", he told the press.

The draft constitution made Thondaman very sad. He told this writer: "My friend Colvin has failed to look after the Tamils, both Ceylonese and Indian". The CWC issued a statement condemning the 1972 constitution. It gave three main reasons.

First, had been enacted without the consent and participation of the Ceylon and Indian Tamils. Indian Tamils were absent from the scene because no representative of theirs was in parliament. Ceylon Tamils

were absent because their representatives had boycotted the constitution-making, as their basic demands — federalism, official status for the Tamil Language an end to state-aided colonisation and citizenship for the Indian Tamils — had been rejected by the government.

Secondly, it denied the Indian Tamils their basic human rights and right of citizenship. Thirdly, it discriminated between citizens by descent and citizens by registration.

Thondaman also issued a very critical statement to the press. He said the article which accorded Buddhism a special place failed to give some sort of recognition to Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, the other three major religions practised in Sri Lanka.

Without mentioning the other religions by name, the constitution merely said it assured all other religions the rights granted by section 18(1) d, the section which guarantees freedom of worship. Thondaman said this type of assurance was not necessary. Those religions could look after themselves without state interference.

He was also highly critical of the official language clause. He said it should have explicitly included the provisions connected with the use of the Tamil language. Instead it stated: ".....as provided by the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956....." Thondaman said such small favours were not necessary. He suggested that the provision itself should be deleted.

The 1972 constitution merely widened the ethnic divide. The Federal Party and Tamil Congress too, were disappointed with the new constitution. It had removed section 29 of the Soulbury Constitution, the sole safeguard against Sinhala domination. This common sense of helplessness forged a strong bond among the three parties of the Tamil community.

One day, in mid-1972, during a discussion with Chelvanayakam at his chambers in Alfred Place, Thondaman told him: "Time has come for the Tamil community to unite".

Thondaman told this writer on the day the formation of the Tamil United Front was announced, that Chelvanayakam had immediately grasped the significance of the suggestion. "Can we form a united action group?" he asked.

Thondaman replied: "We are powerful individually, but we are unable to achieve much. We can be more effective if we unite".

Thondaman made another suggestion. He told Chelvanayakam that at least two leaders should do full-time party work. "Part time politics will not work. The CWC is effective because its leaders are doing trade union work on a full-time basis. They should be paid for their work".

Chelvanayakam agreed and Thondaman suggested the names of Dr. E. M. V. Naganathan and M. Sivasi-thamparam. But nothing further happened.

The Tamil United Front gave new strength to the Tamils of Sri Lanka. The fact that the leaders of the three Tamil political parties — Chelvanayakam, Pon-nambalam and Thondaman — headed the TUF gave the front added lustre and influence.

The three parties worked closely. The three leaders presided at meeting in rotation. They took part in the civil disobedience campaign launched on October 2, 1973. Thondaman and Sellasamy addressed election meetings in support of the common candidate at the Mannar by-election of January 1974.

The 1972 constitution was adopted early in May and Sri Lanka became a republic on May 22. Soon afterwards the TUF submitted a six-point demand to Mrs. Bandaranaike. The six demands were:

1. Tamil Language should be given the same status as Sinhala in the constitution.
2. There should be constitutional guarantees of full citizenship to all Tamil-speaking people who had made this country their home. There should not be different categories of citizenship or discrimination against some of them. The state should have no power to deprive a citizen of his citizenship.

3. The state should be secular, with equal protection accorded to all religions.
 4. The state should ensure valid fundamental rights, guaranteeing equality of persons and ethno-cultural groups.
 5. There should be provision in the constitution for the abolition of caste and untouchability.
 6. In a democratic and socialist society, only a decentralised structure of government would make for a participatory democracy with people's power rather than state power.
- . The letter embodying the six-point demand said that if the government failed to take meaningful steps to amend the constitution accordingly within three months ending on September 30, 1972, the TUF would launch a non-violent struggle to win back the freedom and rights of the Tamil people.

The government of Mrs. Bandaranaike failed to respond to the six-point demand and the TUF launched its passive resistance campaign in the northern and eastern provinces on October 2, Gandhi Jayanthi day. The campaign commenced with the hoisting of the Tamil flag, the Rising Sun flag. It was followed by poojas. Thondaman participated in this events.

On October 3, the next day, Chelvanayakam resigned his seat in parliament. In a statement in parliament, Chelvanayakam said: "The history of the Tamil people in this country since 1948 has been one of deterioration.

"As soon as Ceylon became independent, the first thing the Sinhalese government did was to deprive Tamil estate workers of the vote. This was carefully manoeuvred through a citizenship law that deprived them of citizenship and by granting the vote to citizens only.

"The next most important thing that took place was the passing of the Sinhala Only Act by the S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike government in 1956.

The next important event was the creation of a new constitution by a legislature that was Sinhalese-weighted. The constitution has given everything to the Sinhalese and nothing to the Tamils. The Sinhala Only Act has been so strengthened that it requires a two-third majority to alter it".

Chelvanayakam concluded his speech challenging the government to contest him at KKS.

The KKS by-election was postponed repeatedly and Thondaman had persisted in demanding it. It was finally held on February 6, 1975, Chelvanayakam won convincingly.

During this time the CWC was drawing closer to the UNP and other opposition parties. The CWC joined the dawn-to-dusk hunger strike organised by five trade unions and Prins Gunasekera on October 18, 1972. The five unions were the CWC, Ceylon Estate Staff Union, Ilankai Tholilalar Kalagam, Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union and the New Red Flag Plantation Workers' Union. The hunger strike was to protest against three repressive legislations — the Public Security Act, the Criminal Justice Commission Act and the Press Council Bill — which the coalition government was then rushing through parliament.

Thondaman aligned himself closely with the UNP on the question of the Lake House take-over. He said in an interview: "Lake House has always been my greatest critic and detractor. It has always campaigned against my people. If there is anyone who should not worry about the Lake House take-over, it is myself. But I believe in press freedom.

"I believe in democracy. Freedom of expression is one of the pillars on which democracy rests. That's why I opposed the Lake House take-over"

In August 1973, the UNP organised a boycott of the newspapers published by Lake House which had been brought under state control. The CWC supported the boycott.

Throughout 1973 the CWC continued its agitation for a monthly wage. It organised a token strike on February 15, 1973, to impress upon the government the urgent need for a monthly wage. It also informed the

CEEF that the executive committee had decided to ask for the minimum monthly wage to be fixed at Rs. 180, double the original demand. Its reasons for the upward revision were the steep rise in the cost of living and the relative profitability of the tea industry. The CWC also added new demands: a six-hour working day and no denial of work for late attendance.

The CEEF was adamant. It had the support of the government. The LSSP and CP, partners of the government, were also not happy about Thondaman winning the monthly wage demand. The Minister of Lands and Land Development, Hector Kobbekaduwa, took up a blatant anti-Thondaman stand. He even threatened to throw him out of the country.

Thondaman did not yield. He kept up the pressure. He gave notice of a seven-day token strike starting September 13. On September 12, a day before the strike, Labour Minister Siriwardene asked Thondaman over for talks at his residence. He conveyed Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike's concern over the proposed strike, when matters could be resolved by negotiation. Siriwardene told Thondaman the monthly wage demand would receive his earnest consideration.

Thondaman told the minister the strike was to commence the next morning, but he was prepared to delay it by one day if the Minister would give it in writing that the matters in dispute would be settled by negotiation. Siriwardene agreed to send him such letter the next morning.

The minister kept his word and Thondaman placed the letter before the executive committee. He told the committee that it was the first time the minister had committed himself in writing and they should give him a chance to resolve the dispute. He advised the committee that in negotiations one must always try to win over the neutral side. "By agreeing to accede to the wish of the minister I have won his sympathy. That is the foundation for future victory," he told his critics.

Calling on the workers to report to work the next day, the CWC said the first stage of the struggle had been won and they should prepare for the second.

The second stage began on December 20, 1973, Nego-

tiations with the CEEF had failed and two new grievances had accumulated meanwhile. The first was the cut in the rice ration. The coalition came to power in 1970 promising two measures of rice per week on ration. It honoured its promise by supplying one measure of free rice and charging the bare cost for the other. But a severe shortfall in local rice production combined with a shortage of foreign exchange, compelled the government in October 1973 to cut the ration to half a measure of rice per week. The government also curtailed the issue of flour to two pounds a coupon. Earlier there had been an unrestricted supply of flour. This led to conditions of starvation on the estates and to long bread queues. There were also instances of estate workers not being allowed to join the queue.

Agitation by the workers and representations by the CWC prompted the government to issue the estate workers with 'atta' flour at Rs. 1.10 a pound, through the estate superintendent.

The second grievance was the displacement of estate staff when estates that fell under the Land Reform Law were taken over by the state. This became a major problem as most of the estates were vested with the government, under land reform.

The CWC and the other four unions in the Joint Committee of Plantation Trade Unions called a 10-day token strike on December 20, 1973. The demands were: a monthly wage, equality of wages for men and women, gratuity, six-hour working day, no denial of work for late attendance, restoration of the rice ration, decrease in the price of flour and sugar and non-displacement of staff on estates acquired by the state.

The strike turned out to be a trial of strength between the pro-government and anti-government trade unions. The DWC, LEWU and other pro-government unions ordered their workers to work. The government also mounted a strong campaign to discredit the CWC. It called the strike anti-national. In a statement on December 17, the government threatened strong action to protect the tea industry. There was also an attempt to show the strike as part of the Tamil United Front's non-corporation movement launched in the north and east.

On December 20, first day of the strike, the TUF MP V. Dharmalingam raised the issue in parliament during adjournment. In his reply, Finance Minister Dr. N. M. Perera said: "The strike is part of the opposition satyagraha campaign. It has failed to encompass all estate workers". The Minister of Plantation Industries, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva said: "All striking estate workers will return to work either today or tomorrow".

But they did not. Thondaman claimed that the strike was a total success. CEEF Secretary, Roland Wijewickreme said: "I wouldn't say work is at a standstill. It's true that estate workers are on strike. But there are also several unions whose people have agreed to work".

As the strike progressed, the government's criticism increased. The pro-government unions campaigned to show that the strike was politically oriented and reactionary. Aziz called it a misadventure. The Communist Party dubbed it anti-working class.

The action committee of the Joint Committee of Plantation Trade Unions met on December 27, the eighth day of the strike, at the CWC headquarters. Thondaman advised the committee to call off the strike. There was some murmur of dissent. Thondaman said the government seemed to be adamant not to yield. Prolonging the strike would be useless. The correct strategy in such a circumstance, would be to call it off and resume it at a more favourable time.

The strike was called off on December 27. The statement read: "Having succeeded in our primary objective of demonstrating to the government and employees the unity of purpose of the overwhelming sector of the plantation workers, the Joint Committee of Plantation Trade Unions has decided unanimously to call off the token strike and give notice to the government and the employers to grant its demands within three months".

Thondaman told the press that the second stage was over and the third stage would be launched in March, 1974. "We are progressing, step by step", he told the press.

Implementation of the Sirima-Shastri Pact of 1964 was very slow and both countries were concerned about it. Periodic official reviews pointed to the necessity for

both governments to find a solution to the residual problem of 150,000 stateless persons. A meeting was arranged in New Delhi between Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for a review of the problem. The two leaders agreed to quicken implementation of the 1964 solution and to share the 150,000 persons left equally between India and Sri Lanka.

The agreement was hailed by most Lankan political parties. The Sri Lanka Communist Party's General Secretary, Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe said "I am glad this problem had been finally solved. I am also glad that the final solution had been reached between Sri Lanka and India amicably".

Many estate unions welcomed the agreement. Aziz called it a historic achievement and thanked Mrs. Bandaranaike for it. The LEWU leader, Dr. N. M. Perera described it as a great victory for diplomacy. But Thondaman was not happy. He told the press: "The two governments have continued with their numbers game in determining the future status of a group of human beings without any regard to their preferences or choice."

He continued: "At face value, the agreement would appear to be an improvement on the original Sirima-Shastri pact, in respect of the ratio: the ratio 7:4 has been reduced 1 : 1. But it must not be forgotten that the late Shastri had only an estimate of the numbers involved to guide him, whereas Mrs. Gandhi had definite numbers to go by, relating to the preferences of the affected people. In this context it is manifest that India has once again made a substantial concession to the government of Sri Lanka in this matter".

On February 13 the CWC wrote to Mrs. Bandaranaike congratulating her on the success achieved at the Indo-Sri Lanka talks with Mrs. Gandhi. And it asked her to take steps to integrate stateless persons into the fabric of national life.

It said the handicaps cast on people of Indian origin by disfranchisement had strangled their development; it requested her help in the fields of education, social and economic advancement the right to own their dwelling houses, the right to travel, the right to equal job opportunities, the right to obtain scholarships higher education and the right to enter vocational training institutions.

Thondaman also wrote to Mrs. Bandaranaike about the difficulty in buying rice. In her reply, Mrs. Bandaranaike informed Thondaman that she was endeavouring to give the country a basic minimum of one measure of rice a week on the ration.

On April 3, 1974 the government announced a 20 per cent pay rise for the public sector and a 10 per cent increase for the mercantile sector. The plantation sector was overlooked or ignored. That gave Thondaman a platform for reviving his agitation for a monthly wage. He also wanted the campaign to be more broad-based. On invitation of the CWC, a meeting of ten plantation trade unions was held on May, 1974 at the Tea Propaganda Board auditorium in Kollupitiya. A committee of Plantation Trade Unions (CPTU) was set up to strive for a monthly wage.

The committee prepared a memorandum to be presented to the Prime Minister and decided to meet on June 5 to ratify it. But all attempts to map out a plan for unified action failed. Then the DWC asked for a postponement of the meeting for June 17. At that meeting the DWC Secretary, V. P. Ganeshan, wanted more time to ensure that everything had been done to forge unity among all estate unions on the wage demand. The CWC opposed postponement and decided to formulate its own program of action.

But later, in order to carry the DWC with it, the CWC called another meeting on July 5. The DWC accepted the invitation. Aziz told the press: "We will stress that we should strive to win the demands, but insist that our action should not be motivated to strengthen reactionary forces. They should not be directed to frustrate the socialist policies of the government".

On July 5, the CWC and DWC reached an agreement on a memorandum to be sent to the Prime Minister, urging her to grant a monthly wage to estate workers. Some of the other unions affiliated to the CWC endorsed the memorandum, which contained five demands: reasonable monthly wage; adequate supply of food at fair price; continuity of employment in the estates taken over under the Land Reform Law; workers already thrown out to be reinstated or given alternative employment; and land to be given to estate workers for food production.

The Minister of Plantation Industries, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva invited the estate trade unions for talks on the

government decision to ensure minimum earnings to plantation labour. Labour Minister Siriwardene was also present. The minister suggested a minimum of 20 days' work a month. The DWC accepted it.

Thondaman rejected it, saying it was no substitute for a monthly wage.

By this time the political environment had deteriorated. Tamil-Sinhala relations had worsened steadily since the enactment of the 1972 constitution. The youth wing of the TUF had become disillusioned not only with the Sinhala leadership but its own traditional Tamil leadership too.

A small group of youths, among them Uma Maheswaran and Prabakaran, who had been denied university education because of the mediawise standardisation the SLFP government had introduced to lower Tamil student intake at the universities, decided that the democratic methods of the Tamil leadership had failed. Their only option was to take up arms.

This group did two things. They commenced a clandestine arms training program and stepped up pressure on the TUF leadership to adopt as their goal the attainment of a separate state called Eelam. The TUF, ignored by Mrs. Bandaranaike and smarting at its failure in forging alignments with both the SLFP and the UNP, caved in and adopted the Eelam resolution at the Vaddukoddai Convention of May, 1976. The main resolution adopted by that sessions, dubbed the Vaddukoddai Resolution, also changed the name of the group from the Tamil United Front to the Tamil United Liberation Front.

This writer met Chelvanayakam on his return to Colombo after the sessions. In an off-the-record conversation, he explained that he was personally opposed to a separate state, but adopted the Eelam demand as a bargaining position to achieve his aim of a federal Sri Lanka.

"No country in the world, especially India, is going to accept the division of Sri Lanka. Without Indian support we will never be able to attain Eelam. We are going to ask for Eelam to make the Sinhala people agree to an autonomous Tamil region", Chelvanayakam said.

I asked him whether the Sinhala leadership would agree even to an autonomous Tamil region. He replied: "The Sinhala leadership is very short-sighted. It has never looked beyond the next election. This type of politics cannot go on for long. They will see their folly sooner or later. Then they will accede to the Tamil demand".

Chelvanayakam was talking only in terms of a change of heart among the Sinhala leadership. He never envisaged the rise of Tamil militancy.

Thondaman was not happy about the Vaddukoddai resolution. He immediately dissociated himself and the CWC from the Eelam resolution. The establishment of a separate state would not help solve the plantation Tamil problem, he said.

In a letter to the Secretary of the TULF on May 21, CWC General Secretary, M. S. Sellasamy, said the Vaddukoddai resolution had gone beyond the mandate given to the CWC's association with the TUF.

"The CWC will continue to associate with the TULF only to the limited extent of its own policies and programs", the letter said.

Sellasamy also informed the TULF that in the context of the Vaddukoddai resolution it would not be possible for Thondaman to function as a president of the TULF. But he maintained a very close relationship with that group.

That relationship helped him in bringing the UNP and the TULF together during the 1977 general election. Thondaman arranged a meeting between the UNP and TULF leaders at his flat opposite Royal College, Jayewardene, M. D. Banda and Esmond Wickremasinghe were the UNP side. The TULF's theoretician, S. Kathirvelpillai, Amirthalingam and Sivasithamparam the TULF team. Thondaman urged the necessity of unity among all the opposition groups, especially the UNP and TULF, if they were to defeat the SLFP. Both sides agreed.

Kathirvelpillai said: "We are not here to make demands. This is not the time. Democracy is in peril. We

are prepared to support you in your effort to save democracy".

Jayewardene was pleased. He thanked Kathirvelpillai for such sentiments. He asked the TULF leaders what specific demands they would like granted if the UNP captured power.

Kathirvelpillai reminded Jayewardene of their past experiences and suggested that, instead of bargaining, it would be better if the UNP undertook to redress Tamil grievances.

Jayewardene readily agreed and the causes were identified: use of Tamil Language; halting the colonisation of Tamil areas; employment; mediawise standardisation; citizenship to the stateless.

Jayewardene was pleased with the outcome. While enjoying the sweets and coffee that Kothai Thondaman, a pleasant hostess, served Jayewardene remarked: "You win fifteen seats and we can win about 70. Then we can form our government".

Details of this secret meeting were told this writer by Kathirvelpillai himself, on an off-the-record basis, and made public by Thondaman in 1983, in his speech in parliament. Thondaman also tabled the text of the letter he had written to Jayewardene about this meeting.

By the time the UNP-TULF meeting took place the political atmosphere in the country had grown fairly hot. The UNP had launched a satyagraha movement on May 22, 1974, Republic Day, at Attanagala, Mrs. Bandaranaike's electorate, to force the United Front Government to hold elections the next year, on completion of its five-year term.

The United Front, comprising the SLFP, LSSP and CP, was elected for a five year term on May 27, 1970, but extended its term by including a provision in the new constitution that the term of the first parliament would be five years from the day Sri Lanka became a republic, which was May 22, 1972. The UNP argued that this extension was decided without the approval of the people and was therefore not binding on the people. The CWC supported that stand.

There was a mass movement in Colombo and satyagraha in Anuradhapura, Kandy and Attanagalla. The CWC participated in them all. The Attanagalla satyagraha was fixed for May 22, 1974. Republic Day. The atmosphere was charged with tension. There was information that the SLFP was preparing to block the roads to prevent the UNP leaders and supporters from reaching the satyagraha venue. When he heard of it, Jayewardene rushed to Attanagalla the night before and stayed in a supporter's home. Some other leaders also managed to reach Attanagalla that night.

Thondaman got a call early the next morning. Banda was on the line. He told Thondaman of the SLFP's plan. "Come early", he advised. Thondaman acted fast. He telephoned Sellasamy and asked him to get his people ready early. He drove to the CWC headquarters and found that about 20 people had arrived. They left for Attanagalla very early, in three cars. They took the byroads and managed to reach the satyagraha site.

Jayewardene was surprised to see Thondaman so early. "Thonda! You've come. How did you manage?"

"No problem", Thondaman replied

"You're a great man", said Jayewardene, highly pleased.

Many of the UNP leaders could not reach Attanagalla, Gamini Jayasuriya was waylaid

When SLFPers came to know that Thondaman had participated in the satyagraha they were enraged. They raised it as a major issue and Minister Felix R. Dias Bandaranaike made a caustic comment about it in parliament. The communal tune that Sri Lanka was being sold to Thondaman was played again.

But Thondaman always had a soft corner for Felix. He admired his intellect, his capacity and quick grasp of problems. He still recalls, with pleasure, the many times he took problems to him for solution. One was concerning the Labour Tribunal. The judge in question had insisted that the cases should be filed in Sinhala. Thondaman objected and argued that he had the right to file the case in Tamil; to help the judge however he would file it in English. But the judge was adamant on Sinhala only.

Thondaman went to Felix—who immediately phoned the Secretary of the Justice Ministry and told him that the judge was there to solve industrial disputes, not the language problem.

In May 1975 Jayewardene resigned his Colombo South seat in parliament and called on the government to conduct a by-election as a test of popular support. The by-election was held later that year and Jayewardene won with a big majority. Thondaman and the CWC campaigned for him.

Meanwhile the United Front, formed on June 5, 1968, "to carry forward the progressive advance begun in 1956 under the leadership of Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. in order to establish a socialist democracy", began to rot. There was constant in-fighting in the cabinet and the LSSP was "sacked" in August 1975. It happened over a speech that Finance Minister Dr. N. M. Perera had delivered at the hartal commemoration meeting held at the New Town Hall, Colombo.

There Dr. Perera had stated that the LSSP would quit the government if the foreign-owned company estates were not nationalised in the proper way. He said the LSSP had accepted portfolios in the government of Mrs. Bandaranaike not for personal glory, but to further socialist policies and develop the country. If anybody tried to thwart their attempts to march towards socialism they would leave the United Front government.

Mrs. Bandaranaike called for an explanation Dr. Perera said sorry. Mrs. Bandaranaike then called on President William Gopallawa, the next morning (August 14) and asked him to dismiss the LSSP ministers.

The Communist Party stayed with the government but left it in frustration in February, 1977, three months before the July 1977 general election.

As the 1977 elections approached, the political forces in Sri Lanka were polarising into three centres. The SLFP was left alone as the representative of Sinhala racialism. The traditional left, comprising the LSSP, the CP and the newly formed Sri Lanka Mahajana Party led by film idol Kumaranatunga, formed a united front. The UNP gathered within its fold the TULF and the CWC—the Tamil-oriented political parties—and the All Ceylon Muslim League.

An incident that took place during the satyagraha campaign brought Thondaman very close to the UNP leadership, particularly to Jayewardene.

It happened one night when Thondaman was fast asleep. His wife Kothai put him up saying someone was ringing the door bell. Thondaman found that his mid-night visitors were three UNP leaders, one a minister. They looked agitated. They told Thondaman they had information that government was going to arrest Jayewardene.

"Let him get out of his house immediately. He must go underground", he said.

The visitors said that had already been done.

"If you can evade arrest for 72 hours I will call my people out".

And Thondaman meant it. He immediately informed Sellasamy and instructed the district offices to stand by for a strike. Fortunately nothing happened, but the minister reporting the incident to Jayewardene remarked: "Thonda is a real friend".

CHAPTER 8

THONDA JOINS THE CABINET

Six days after his 66th. birthday, at the auspicious hour of 10.05 a.m. on September 6, 1975, Thondaman was sworn in as a cabinet minister by President Jayewardene. He thus became the first person of Indian stock to enter the cabinet in independent Sri Lanka.

In the first State Council, long before independence, another minister had been appointed from the people of Indian origin. But Peri Sundaram was elected in a different era. when a majority of Indian Tamils laboured. Indian Tamils enjoyed equality in everything including voting rights. But Thondaman's appointment was in a different era, when a majority of Indian Tamils laboured under severe disabilities, including the loss of the basic human right of citizenship.

That evening, reporting on Thondaman's swearing-in ceremony, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation's commentator said: "This is a small step for Mr. Thondaman but a giant leap for the people whom he leads".

Ascending the marble steps of President's House to take oaths as a cabinet minister was indeed only a small step in Thondaman's life; the inveterate pilgrim. whose foot-prints had been imprinted on every pathway in the up-country. And this small step came his way almost casually.

On August 2, that year, in the course of a chat with Thondaman, President Jayewardene outlined his plan to appoint district ministers as a means of taking the administration closer to the people. There were to be 25 district ministers, which meant one for every seven members in parliament. Then he said: "I have spoken about it to Amirthalingam. If the TULF agrees, they will get three district ministerships".

The TULF had not told Thondaman about this. So Thondaman met the TULF leaders, Amirthalingam, Sivasithamparam and Kathirvelpillai that evening and told them what Jayewardene had spoken of to him. Amirthalingam said they were considering Jayewardene's offer but had not come to any conclusion. "If you decide to accept the offer one of the three ministerships should be given to Thondaman", Thondaman told Amirthalingam.

The next day President Jayewardene asked Thondaman whether he had talked with Amirthalingam. Thondaman told him of their conversation.

"Will you join?" President Jayewardene asked.

"What is the use of joining as a district minister?" Thondaman replied.

"If I invite you, will you join the cabinet?"

A pause.

"I am inviting you. Will you join?", President Jayewardene persisted.

"If you invite me, I will. But there are a few hitches".

"What are they "

Thondaman explained that he could not be bound by UNP policies in matters of citizenship and labour. He owed his position to the CWC and the CWC's policy was to get citizenship for the stateless and better working conditions for estate labour.

"If you will allow me to follow my own policy in these two matters I will have no hesitation in joining the cabinet", Thondaman said.

President Jayewardene readily agreed. He said Thondaman was free to follow his own policy in these two concerns. He then asked Thondaman for his preference in the subjects to be allocated to him. Thondaman mentioned four: small industries, handicrafts, dairy farming and rural development. President Jayewardene said Mrs. Wimala Kannangara would be hurt if he took rural development from her and agreed to the other three.

Thondaman asked for two weeks to get the approval of the CWC working committee. He informed the CWC and the TULF of the offer. The TULF leaders met Thondaman at his Colombo residence and Amirthalingam said he had no objection to Thondaman joining the government. They then discussed the CWC-TULF relationship. They agreed on a flexible approach and Amirthalingam asked Thondaman to continue working for the welfare of the Tamil people, whether from the north, east or the plantations.

Thondaman summoned the meeting of the executive council for September 5, 1978. At that meeting some members expressed misgivings. Thondaman dispelled their doubts with his explanation. He argued that a strong willed Sinhala leader with vision was needed to solve the stateless problem. President Jayewardene was such a leader and his hand should be strengthened.

The executive council unanimously accepted Thondaman's stand-point and adopted a resolution authorising him to join the cabinet.

The resolution said: The Executive Committee of the CWC, conscious of the fact that the people of Indian origin, the bulk of whom are plantation workers, have been effectively denied participation in the mainstream of national life and in all avenues of human development for the past thirty years by the disfranchisement and other acts of discrimination by successive governments, reiterates that the isolation of and the discrimination both in law and practice against this community should end forthwith, thus removing the impediments in the way of this community's integration with the rest of society.

"The executive committee notes with satisfaction the active participation of the CWC Political Wing in the deliberations of the Select Committee for the Revision of the Constitution and the support given to the Bill in the National State Assembly.

"While acknowledging that the new constitution has not sufficiently met all the hopes and aspirations of the minorities, the Executive Council recognises the fact that as far as the stateless persons are concerned, the new constitution is an improvement and a step forward, and for the first time it affords the people of Indian origin

the opportunity to come into the mainstream of national life.

"In this context, the invitation extended by His Excellency J. R. Jayewardene to the CWC Political Wing to join the cabinet is a step in that direction.

"The Executive Council, therefore, resolves to authorise and direct the Political Wing to co-operate and meaningfully participate in the government of His Excellency J. R. Jayewardene and accept the invitation to serve in the cabinet".

After the swearing-in ceremony at President's House Thondaman went to the CWC office where he was given a reception. Sellasamy garlanded him with a massive garland. Thondaman said he had joined the cabinet not for personal glory but to use his position to achieve the betterment of the plantation Tamils.

At 2 p.m. he went to parliament. He was greeted with applause. He crossed over from his seat in the opposition ranks and sat in the front bench with the government. After question hour, Speaker Anandatissa de Alwis invited him to make a statement. Thondaman said his joining the cabinet was the happy harbinger of communal harmony and mutual development.

He said he was glad that he had participated in the Select Committee set up to draft the new constitution, where he had convinced the government of the many problems facing the so-called stateless persons.

"I was able to make the government understand their problems and a number of amendments moved by me were accepted, the most important of which was the granting of fundamental rights to stateless persons".

Thondaman decided to join the cabinet because, by and large, President Jayewardene had honoured his pre-election pledges. He honoured the pledge he made to the TULF members who had met him at Thondaman's flat by including a special section: "Problems of Tamil-speaking People".

That section read: "The United National Party accepts the position that there are numerous problems confronting the Tamil-speaking people. The lack of solu-

tion to these problems has made the Tamil-speaking people support even a movement for the creation of a separate state. In the interests of national integration and unity so necessary for the economic development of the whole country, the party feels such problems should be solved without loss of time. The party, when it comes to power, will take all steps to remedy their grievances in such fields as:

1. Education,
2. Colonisation.
3. Use of the Tamil language.
4. Employment in public and semi-public corporations.

"We will summon an All Party Conference as stated earlier and implement its decisions".

Though the UNP included this special section, Jayewardene wanted the TULF and the CWC to keep the agreement a secret until the last day of the election campaign. That was to deny the SLFP the opportunity to raise the communal cry.

The general election was held on July 21, 1977. The UNP made a clean sweep of it by winning a historic five-sixth majority with 140 seats in the 168-member parliament. The SLFP was reduced to eight seats. The TULF secured the second highest number 18 seats. The CWC won one seat and the other seat went to an independent. The Jayewardene government took office on July 23.

The TULF parliamentary group met at the Vavuniya town hall on July 30. Thondaman was present too. Amirthalingam suggested that he, Thondaman should be elected Leader of the Opposition. Thondaman declined the offer. He said he was the sole representative of the plantation Tamils and to accept would not be fair by them. Amirthalingam's name was then proposed by Sivasithamparam, seconded by P. Ganeshalingam. Sivasithamparam was elected vice-president of the TULF parliamentary group.

The relationship between the UNP government and

the TULF began to sour within a year. The monthly meetings between the cabinet and the TULF leadership proved futile exercise. Decisions taken at those meetings were not implemented and the TULF grew increasingly disillusioned. Amirthalingam summed up TULF feeling: "They serve us nice short-eats and tea. They also talk very nicely. That is all".

With the start of constitution-making relations turned bitter. The TULF boycotted the constituent assembly. Thondaman, however, stayed with the government, attended meetings of the government parliamentary group and took an active part in constitution drafting.

Thondaman got the help of leading Tamil constitutional lawyers in this task. He submitted a detailed memorandum on language, citizenship and human rights to the constitutional committee. He also made oral submissions. Through his efforts Tamil was given the status of a national language. The right to correspond with the government in Tamil and receive a reply in Tamil was also won by his efforts. He persuaded the government to do away with the distinction between registered citizens and citizens by descent. He also got the plantation workers the right to vote at local government elections. He had a clause guaranteeing fundamental rights to stateless persons for ten years embodied in the constitution.

Thondaman also played an important role as the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, to which he was elected in August 1977. During the single year he served in that capacity, he strove to improve public accounting and auditing systems. He criticised the massive wastage prevalent in the public sector and wanted public officers to be made more accountable.

Soosaithasan, who succeeded Thondaman in that post says the CWC boss was a hard taskmaster. His searching questions often made government officers quake. Yet he was very kind to them and treated them with respect.

His contribution to the Indian Tamil community and to Sri Lanka became more marked after he joined the cabinet. "I have been called upon to share a great responsibility and I will not shirk it", he said in a statement issued after he assumed office.

On his way to Nuwara Eliya Thondaman called on the Mahanayakes of Malwatte and Asgiriya chapters. Both mahanayakes said they were pleased to bless him. The Ven. Palipane Chandananda thero, Mahanayake of the Asgiriya Chapter said: "We must not forget that even though we being to different races and different faiths, we are children of Sri Lanka."

Thondaman replied that he was always aware of it and had worked tirelessly for Sri Lanka. "My people toil daily, from dawn to dusk, for the prosperity of Sri Lanka. They want to live and die in Sri Lanka. They should be allowed to work for Sri Lanka as equal citizens".

At Nuwara Eliya he was given a grand reception. They garlanded him with tea leaves and he said: "You all know that I am a minister. You might have seen how the police escorted me to this ground. I am your representative. I am honoured because I am your representative. That means the honour is actually given to you. Everyone of you must regard yourself as the actual minister. That must make you more hardworking, more responsible".

A few days later Thondaman gifted a silver plated bell to the Dalada Maligawa in Kandy. The bell was borne in a colourful procession of dancers, drummers and elephants, led by the maligawa tusker Raja. Thondaman, Sellasamy and Annamalai marched at the head of the procession. The Education Minister and Diyawadeni Nilame, Nissanka Wijeyaratne, received Thondaman at the entrance of the maligawa. After paying homage to the Tooth Relic Thondaman said: "Hindus worship the Lord Buddha as a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu. To Hindus, Buddhism is not a foreign religion".

On his return to Colombo, he called a meeting of all his staff. He told them: "I am a trade unionist who believes in hard work and in results. I will look after you. I will be accessible to you. I want all of you to work hard. I want results, not excuses".

In the field of dairy farming he adopted the slogan "Drink More Milk and Eat Less Beef". He found the cattle population had been diminishing over the years. He took steps to arrest the decline and upgrade their quality. He promoted the Cattle Breeders' Association and

encouraged provender production. Poultry and pig breeding were also encouraged under him.

He took a great interest in small industries and handicrafts. He advised these sectors to organise themselves into co-operatives and upgrade their products to attract the growing global market. He organised a design centre, handicraft competitions and awards, set up handicraft cooperatives and arranged for participation in international fairs.

From the start Thondaman paid special attention to milk production and distribution. On September 18, 1979, he presided over a meeting of Milk Board, officials. A pressman got up and told the minister that the booth in the Fort railway station had no milk after 2 p.m.

"How do you know?" asked an officer, clearly showing his irritation.

"I went there myself", the pressman replied.

"It must have happened only that one day", the officer said.

"No. It happens every day".

"How do you know?"

When the official tried to bully the pressman Thondaman intervened. "Don't cross-examine him. This is a mistake you people make. When vital information is given you waste time in cross-examining the informant, instead of acting right away. Informants are doing a service".

Thondaman had always a good rapport with the press. He treated pressmen well, made himself accessible to them. He is one of the few political leaders who has made full use of pressmen. He used them to put his ideas to the public. He also used them to get a feedback of public reaction.

Thondaman handled pressmen very tactfully. One day in 1980, CWC Vice-President Jaya Peri Sundaram turned aggressively on pressmen during a press conference. He was annoyed over a comment carried in a news paper. He called for the paper's representative and started an argument. Thondaman intervened. "Jaya,"

he said, you are entitled to express your views and the pressman of his. If you want him to respect your views you must also respect his." That ended the confrontation.

Since assuming cabinet office Thondaman became interested in the education of plantation children. He agitated for the government take-over of estate schools. Estate schools had been started in the second half of the 19th century by kankanis and missionaries. They set up two types of schools: one for the top-rung children from the estates and the other for the children of labourers. The better schools imparted a regular education, preparing students for public examinations. The schools for labourers' children taught them to read and write and religious knowledge.

It was in 1907 that the government for the first time showed interest in the education of estate workers' children. It was in that year that estate owners were compelled to give all children between 6 and 10 years an education through their mother tongue. In 1920 legislation was passed for the appointment of qualified teachers. The minimum qualification first prescribed was Junior School Certificate. Later it was raised to the GCE (OL) with three credit passes. When the SLFP government decided to take over schools in 1962 the estate schools were left untouched.

When Thondaman became minister he impressed on the Education Minister Nissanka Wijeyaratne that the estate schools should be taken over. Tamil unit headed by Director of Education Lakshmana Iyer was given the task of studying the question.

He carried out a survey: Estate schools were found to be inadequately staffed and lacking minimum facilities. Classrooms were too few: all the subjects were not taught, no extra-curricular activities were undertaken, no proper drinking water and toilet facilities were provided and the teachers were not trained. Lakshmana Iyer took remedial action.

The schools were taken over in two phases. The first phase commenced in 1977 and the second in July, 1980. Under the first phase, 404 schools with about 600 teachers were taken over under the second, 366 schools and another 600 teachers.

From 1977 Thondaman used almost the entire Rs. 2.5 million vote he got every year under the decentralised budget to improve school buildings; later he persuaded the government to provide an additional Rs. 20 million a year, which also he spent on providing school buildings.

Meanwhile ethnic relations were steadily deteriorating in the country. The militant groups were gaining strength among the Lankan Tamils, especially in Jaffna. They had started attacking the army and tension was building up. Industries Minister Cyril Mathew was increasingly taking the role of Sinhala protector and had come out openly against the TULF. The earlier partnership between the government and the TULF had completely broken down and Thondaman took upon himself the role of mediator. From his earlier role as champion of Tamil causes, he switched to that of mediator.

It proved a most difficult part to play. In April, 1982, two days prior to the Nuwara Eliya sessions of the CWC, this writer questioned Thondaman about his new role. "Had it been thrust on him by the changed circumstances?"

"Partly by circumstances and partly by design", he answered.

He said "I am seeing to it that I don't lose credibility with the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese. I keep my credibility with the Tamils by showing that I am not a government mirror. I follow my own policy and say what I feel is correct. And I keep my credibility with the Sinhalese by making them realise that I hold the interest of Sri Lanka first".

The year 1981 provided two instances of his study independence. The first was the debate on the no-confidence motion against Leader of the Opposition, Amirthalingam. The government MPs supported the motion. A government MP also said Amirthalingam should be publicly hanged at Galle Face Green.

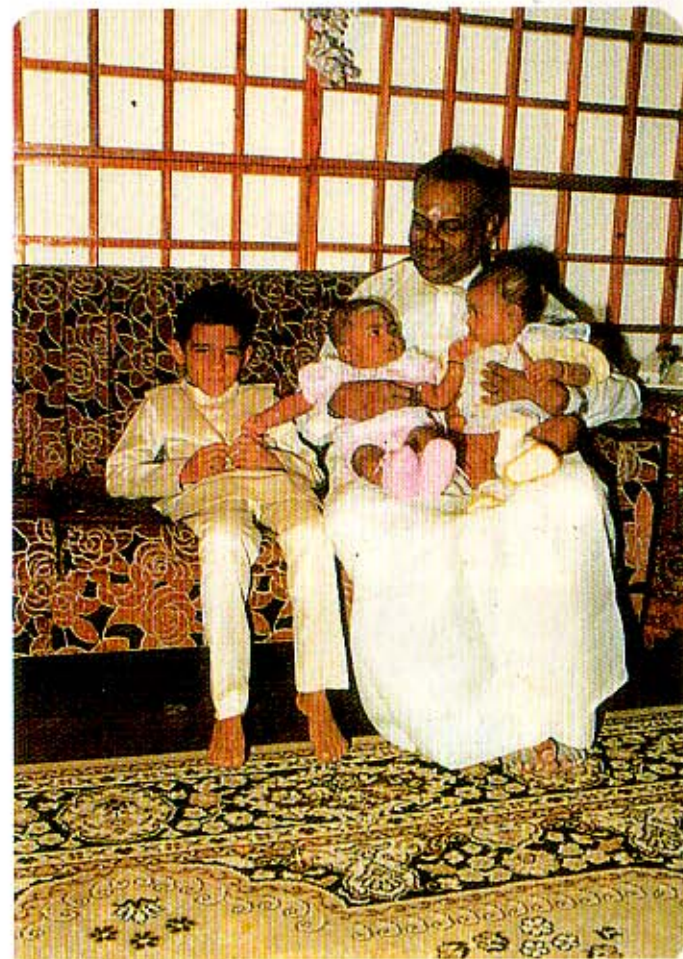
Thondaman opposed the motion and spoke against it. That won him the admiration of the Tamil public. The TULF MP for Mannar, Soosaithasan told the press: "Thondaman is the only Tamil minister in the cabinet who looked after the Tamils".



Thondaman's mission—upliftment through education of the people, of recent Indian origin, whom he calls 'my people'. He is being taken here in procession, to open a school building.



Thondaman on the first release of his autobiography, 'My Life and Times', in 1988, presenting the first copy to President Ranasinghe Premadasa, then Prime Minister. Former Indian High Commissioner J. N. Dixit is also in the picture.



Happy in the company of his family-Thondaman with his great-grand children.



Thondaman who never misses family functions, fondly pampering a great-grand child on his birth day.



Thondaman, Sri Lanka's worker delegate to ILO till he became minister, at an ILO conference in Geneva



Thondaman the traveller-with the Duke of Edinburgh in Australia, in 1984. He was a special invitee to the Duke of Edinburgh Conference.



Thondaman on the first release of his autobiography, 'My Life and Times', in 1983, presenting the first copy to President Ranasinghe Premadasa, then Prime Minister. Former Indian High Commissioner J. N. Dixit is also in the picture.



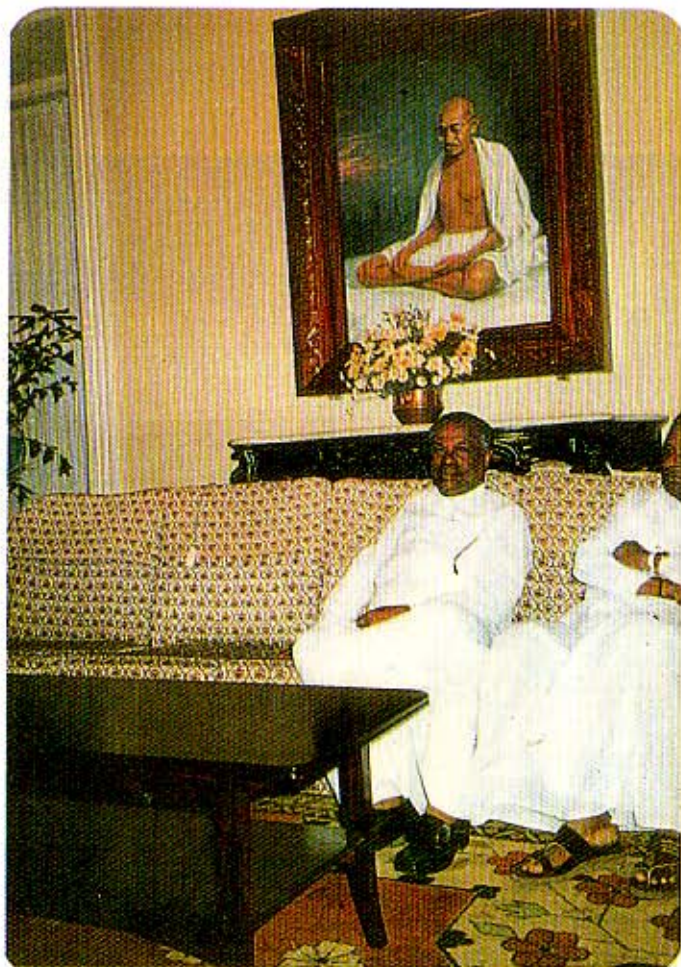
Seated (Centre) Hon. Minister and President of Sri Lanka Indian Community Council.

Seated (Right) M. S. Kandasamy (Vice President)
(Left) K. Aadhiyappan J. P. (Director Finance)

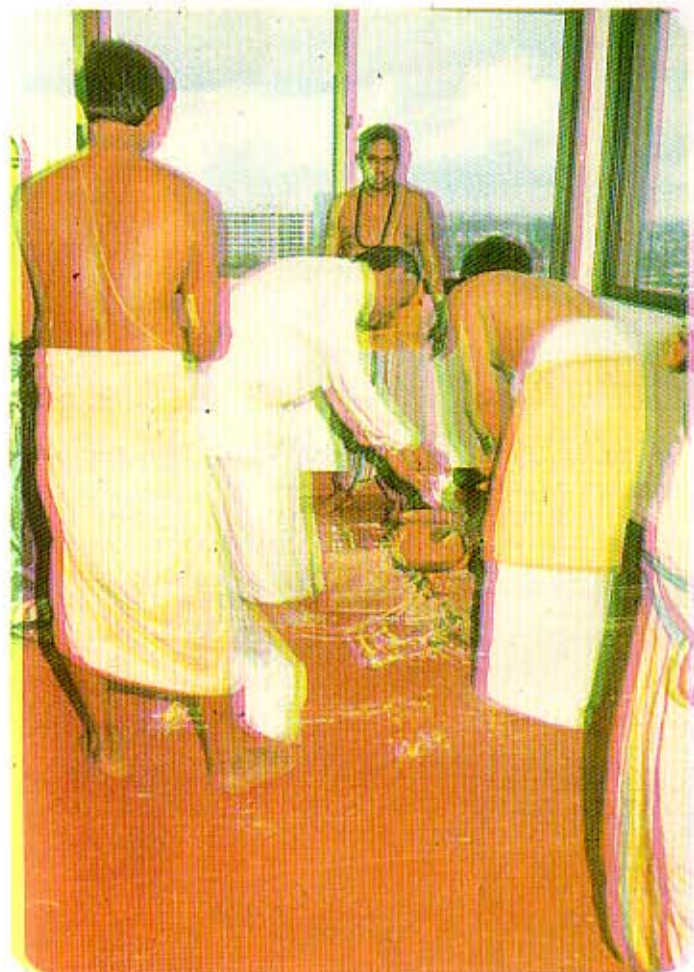
Standing (Left and Right) Members of the Indian Community Council
R. Muthuramalingam Eng., R. Yogarajan,
Dr. K. Pathmanaban, D. Eassuwaren B. Com. J.P.
(Secretary - General), S. Solaimai J. P.
B. Thirunavakarasu and V. Vivekanandan (Attorney-at-law)



With Tamil scholar K. A. P. Visvanatham, on the release of his biography in Tamil, titled 'Thalaivar Thondaman' authored by S. T. Sivanayagam:



At the feet of his master—Mahatma Gandhi, the major inspiration in Thondaman's political life, He delights in sitting under this picture



Men of religion-participating in an auspicious rite at the opening of the Rural Industrial Development Ministry's building at Kollupitiya.



Good friend of Tamil Nadu leaders—with Chief Minister Muthuvel Karunanidhi.



Minister Thondaman meets several delegations a day, both local and foreign—here with British Parliamentarians.

The second instance was during the August riots of that year. Although the hill country Tamils were not involved in the activities of the Tamil militants, violence was unleashed against them using certain incidents in the north as a pretext. Tamil estate labourers in the Ratnapura and Balangoda districts were attacked and driven from their homes.

Thondaman and Sellasamy met President Jayewardene at his Ward Place home on August 17, 1981. Deputy Defence Minister T. B. Werapitiya, Defence Secretary Col. C. P. Dharmapala, Co-ordinating Secretary-General Sepala Attygalla and Inspector-General of Police Ana Seneviratne were there.

Thondaman was blunt and firm. He told President Jayewardene: "Sir, mobs are attacking Tamils in the up-country. The situation should be brought under control without delay. Already many valuable lives have been lost and millions of rupees worth of property."

He then reminded President Jayewardene of his assurance the previous week that he would see to it that no disturbance took place. "Things have worsened since then. Mobs are going about attacking people. Plantation workers were being singled out and killed. We have evidence that hooligans are covertly enjoying the patronage of powerful personalities".

He added: "If you cannot put an end to mob rule, say so. Then the people themselves will take necessary precautions for the safety and security of both persons and property.

"The time has now come. The people have exhausted their patience. We want an end to this reign of terror by thugs".

President Jayewardene replied that he was carefully studying the reports and would take all steps to ensure law and order.

Thondaman also issued a strong statement: unless the government brought mob violence under control, he will be forced to tell his people to adopt necessary measures for self-protection.

His meeting with the President and his statement to

the press jolted the government into action. A state of emergency was declared and the security forces were prodded into action. That helped to restore normalcy.

Thondaman invited President Jayewardene to tour the Ratnapura and Balangoda districts, the worst affected areas. The President was distressed by the damage the rioters had caused. Addressing a meeting of Tamil refugees, he said he was ashamed that the people who had caused these miseries were Sinhala Buddhists. "They are animals. They have behaved worse than animals. They have caused suffering to hundreds of innocent people", he declared.

In September 1981, Thondaman visited Europe. On his way back, he visited Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu he was told of the massive processions and hartal conducted both by the ruling Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam and the opposition party, the Dravida Munnetra Kalagam. Thondaman thanked the Tamil Nadu parties for their concern and support, but advised them not to use the sufferings of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka to gain political benefit for themselves.

On his return to Colombo on September 22, he met the press at his ministry office. He made two points. The first was: "The August, 1981, riots has damaged the image of Sri Lanka". The second: "In India, in Tamil Nadu, particularly, there is a great deal of feeling and concern".

Thondaman also played an important role in the creation of district development councils. Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam of the TULF, who took an active part in preparing the report of the special committee on district development councils, was in constant touch with him.

The CWC contested the DDC elections with the UNP. Thondaman urged the UNP not to contest the TULF in the northern and eastern provinces but without success. He viewed with disfavour the visit of ministers Cyril Mathew and Gamini Disسانayake to the north, to campaign against the TULF. He repeatedly urged President Jayewardene and the cabinet to make the DDCs work.

The Jaffna DDC Chairman, S. Nadaraja resigned in utter frustration in July, 1983. Thondaman was upset. He

told the press: "It is unfortunate Mr. Nadaraja had to reign. This will have tragic consequences". Barely two weeks later the situation did turn tragic. The July 1983 riots completely changed the nature of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka.

The CWC had supported the UNP during the 1982 presidential election and the referendum. Thondaman campaigned hard during the presidential election. He tried to win TULF support for President Jayewardene. The TULF wavered long and ultimately decided to boycott the presidential election. Thondaman was disappointed. He told this writer the TULF lawyers lacked courage and perspective to face problems straight. "They haggle over unnecessary details and miss the point", he said. He also called their decisions an act of treachery..

Thondaman's enthusiasm in the presidential election earned him the ire of the SLFP candidate Hector Kobbekaduwa. Addressing the SLFP organisers of the Central Province, he said: "Thondaman has been dancing a little too much of late. He was very silent when the government crushed his estate kingdom. Now that he is a minister he seems to think he is ruling the country. I must repeat what I said during the 1977 election campaign. If I become president I will take action to acquire the 52 acres he is left with and deport him from this country".

Kobbekaduwa had been critical of Thondaman even earlier. Addressing the press conference held in 1972 to announce the estate take-over, he said: "Thondaman is an Indian. I will send him to India. We cannot permit him to dictate affairs in Sri Lanka".

This type of attack did not frighten Thondaman from building up the CWC or organising his people into a well knit community. He also had to face a new set of problems. The worst was a growing sense of demoralisation and uncertainty among members of the Indian community.

At the Badulla convention in 1982, delegate after delegate voiced this sense of fear. Thondaman, who was presiding, lost his temper at one stage and shouted: "Are you men? What were you doing when you were attacked. Were you scraping coconuts? Why didn't you fight back?".

From then on he took upon himself the task of instilling a fighting spirit in the Indian Tamils. He told them they should not provoke fight or create a situation that would cause a fight, but if they were attacked they had the right of self-defence. He told them the story of Arjuna and the advice Lord Krishna gave him. Everyone had the right to fight for his cause, to fight for Truth and Justice. He said he had long been a devotee of Lord Krishna and observed his teachings.

The second problem was within the Jayewardene cabinet. The chauvinistic Sinhala group within the cabinet had got the upper hand and was swaying the government. Thondaman chose to attack them publicly. At the 1982 convention he made the charge that certain ministers intended to sabotage the Indo-Lanka accords on citizenship. Reporters asked him to identify the ministers but he declined.

In a letter dated March 29, 1983, Thondaman wrote to President Jayewardene on the same issue. He said: "I am disturbed and distressed at trends surfacing even at cabinet level, that do not inspire hope, especially in regard to the solution of problems facing the minority communities.

"If these problems are not resolved during your Excellency's tenure, there is no likelihood of their ever being solved. It was in this belief that I joined Your Excellency's government, to further strengthen your hand.

"I am sure Your Excellency will recall the meeting held at my residence in 1977, on the eve of the general election, when Your Excellency and the Leader of the TULF exchanged views and identified the problems of the Tamil-speaking people. We were happy that understanding was reflected in the UNP manifesto with the view of resolving these problems once and for all once you came to power.

"But after five years in office, it has become clear that whatever steps have been taken are inadequate to solve these problems. This has resulted in the creation of an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion, giving a lever to communal elements to make a mockery of the whole issue.

"Needless for me to reiterate to Your Excellency that this is a matter that needs the serious and immediate attention of the government, so that the Tamil-speaking people could be convinced through positive and meaningful action of the bona fides of the government in so far as their interest are concerned.

"I would urge Your Excellency to treat this matter as a national priority, so that this impasse could be ended for all time.

"Another matter which needs equal priority and calls for a solution without further delay is the question of the stateless.

"We are really reassured and heartened to read Your Excellency's statement in New Delhi in regard to the problems of the stateless, especially in the light of the unhelpful views expressed by the Hon. A. C. S. Hameed, Minister of Foreign Affairs, during our discussions here on the subject in December last year.

"This problem, as Your Excellency is aware, has been dragging on for 35 years and the mounting suffering of the people who have been deprived of their rights is immeasurable. I have had occasions to bring to Your Excellency's notice the problems they encounter in everyday life, even from unexpected sources".

Thondaman's efforts and President Jayewardene's endeavours in the second week of July to make the DDC work were thwarted by the infamous racial riots of July 1983.

The riots broke out on July 24 night. The remains of the 13 Lankan soldiers killed in a landmine blast in Jaffna had been flown to Kanatte to be interred. The mob that dispersed after the funeral started attacking Tamils torching their houses and other buildings. The attacks started in Borella and spread to other parts of Colombo the next morning. By 10 a.m. the situation worsened. Tamils were being attacked and killed.

Thondaman drove to the Presidential Secretariat. President Jayewardene was thoroughly shaken. Thondaman urged him to declare a state of emergency. President Jayewardene was hesitant. "Will the forces obey my order?", he kept asking. Thondaman felt he had been

fed with discouraging reports. Some officials there were physically shivering with fear. Thondaman had to reassure President Jayewardene that everything was not lost. Ministers Ronnie de Mel and Gamini Dissanayake then joined them. Thondaman spent three hours persuading the President to declare a state of emergency.

Thondaman visited the refugee camps in Colombo and had a rough reception from the inmates. They were all angry that he still continued to be in the Jayewardene government. They shouted and hooted at him. They said the Jayewardene government was engaged in systematic genocide. They said that under the UNP government there had been three ethnic riots — in 1977, 1981, and 1983. It took a lot of persuasion to make them quieten down.

Indian feeling was also outraged by the riots. The Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent her Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao, to meet President Jayewardene. President Jayewardene assured him, that he would find a lasting solution to the ethnic problem. When Rao raised the stateless question, the President replied that Thondaman was in his cabinet and he would solve that problem with Thondaman's help. "Leave it to me. I will find a solution", he promised Rao.

As normalcy returned, two statements were issued. The first, on August 2, was by the CWC and the second, on August 15, by Thondaman. The first briefly said: "We do not subscribe to the idea that the recent pogrom is a Sinhala uprising. In our thinking it is the work of well organised groups..... It is more unfortunate that those elements of disaster, these squads of goondas and rabble rousers have been allowed to parade the streets freely, causing havoc and inflicting misery of such proportions with impunity".

The statement also thanked the thousands of Sinhalese who had braved the wrath of marauding mobs to shelter the Tamils.

In his statement Thondaman said the violence against the Tamil minority, which had been a permanent feature of Sri Lanka's political scene for three decades, had erupted once again on a large scale and with unprecedented savagery. Organised groups went on a rampage, unchecked for nearly a week, destroying and looting

property, setting house and establishments on fire and killing and maiming innocent, defenceless victims while the guardians of law remained inactive and, in some instances, even encouraged and assisted the rioters.

He also said there was substantive evidence that the events of the last week of July were not a sudden and spontaneous outburst of the Sinhala population against the Tamils. "It appears that a concerted attempt has been made, by means of a carefully laid plan over a long period of time, to destroy the houses and belongings of persons of Indian origin in the professions and in trade. The objective of the exercise appears to deny the community all avenues of progress and condemn them to a permanent state of captive labour."

The government, instead of pacifying the Tamils who had suffered, tried to justify the attacks by saying that they caused the provocation. It then tried to pacify the Sinhalese by rushing through parliament the sixth constitutional amendment, which requires every MP and government servant to swear allegiance to the unitary constitution. Thondaman advised against such a move; warned the government of the likely consequences.

After the debate, Thondaman told this writer that the biggest mistake the Sinhala leadership was making was to concern itself only with Sinhala opinion. They always forget that Sri Lanka was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, plural society. Therein lay the root cause of Sri Lanka's racial problem.

The TULF refused to take the oath under the sixth amendment and sought refuge in India. They refused to talk to the Colombo government except through India. The sixth amendment was the immediate cause of India's entry into the picture.

Indira Gandhi sent Kopalaswami Parthasarathi, a seasoned diplomat and advisor to the foreign ministry to Colombo in August, to negotiate with President Jayewardene. On his very first visit Parthasarathi called on Thondaman at his ministry and they had a long discussion on the ethnic crisis. From that day Parthasarathi involved Thondaman in the negotiations.

As the pace of the negotiations quickened, Parthasarathi invited Thondaman to New Delhi. He went there

for ten days and had a series of intensive discussions in New Delhi, and in Tamil Nadu. He met Indira Gandhi and Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao. In Tamil Nadu he met Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran and DMK chief M. Karunanidhi. They were anxious that a permanent arrangement should be made to ensure the safety of the Tamil people.

He also had a series of discussions with the TULF leaders Amirthalingam, Sivasithamparam and Sampanthan. Amirthalingam asked Thondaman to look after the interests of all sections of Tamil representation in parliament. Announcing this on his return to Colombo, Thondaman said: "I have now become the sole representative of the Tamils".

Thondaman also met Uma Maheswaran, leader of the militant People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). That meeting created a furore in Sri Lanka.

Thondaman returned to Colombo on October 22 and the next morning, Sunday, briefed President Jayewardene on his Indian tour. He told him that India's good offices and Parthasarathi's services should be accepted and used. He also warned him of the intensity of feeling in Tamil Nadu.

Thondaman called a press conference that evening. The ministry room was packed. He told pressmen of his meetings with the Indian leaders and said: "The people of Tamil Nadu feel intensely about the Tamil problem." He also said: "The feeling in India is that all governments after independence have been intent on destroying the Tamils and oppressing them. Now this issue has become the concern not only of the Tamils and India, but of the world community".

In answer to a question he said: "The people of Tamil Nadu say the Lankan government shut its eyes to the violence being unleashed against the Tamil people". To another question he answered. "In Tamil Nadu they say that in Sri Lanka people observe sil the previous night and kill the next morning", adverting to the fact that riots erupted on the day following poya.

He commented that it was M. G. Ramachandran's popularity that was keeping the people of Tamil Nadu in check. Otherwise they would over run Sri Lanka.

He said his meeting with Uma Maheswaran was fruitful in that the militant leader had agreed to accept an alternative to Eelam.

But many Sinhala leaders were not happy about that meeting with Maheswaran. Some of Thondaman's statements abroad, presenting the Tamil point of view, also irritated the country's extremist Sinhala section. Around noon on November 11, 1983, the Gampaha MP, S. D. Bandaranayake raised this matter in parliament at adjournment time. Quoting a statement made by Thondaman in India the previous week, he charged that it was merely one side of the statistical picture of Sri Lanka's ethnic problem.

Replying to that charge, Thondaman said he had thought S. D. Bandaranayake was a friend of the Tamils. When the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact was negotiated, the UNP leader Jayewardene had led a protest march to Kandy. S. D. Bandaranayake had stopped it and was acclaimed a Sinhala hero. He stopped the march by using thuggery — and thus he became the father of the doctrine of thuggery, violence and stone-throwing. That doctrine had now been developed and perfected in Sri Lanka, he said.

SLFP MP Lakshman Jayakody and S. D. Bandaranayake wanted to know who had perfected the doctrine of thuggery.

Jayakody: He must say who these people are. It can even mean us. The SLFP had nothing to do with the violence.

S. D. Bandaranayake: Are they separatists?

At this there was a loud hubub with Thondaman and Bandaranayake shouting at each other. After the commotion had subsided, Dinesh Gunewardene remarked that during the shouting he had heard Thondaman say that they were the same people who had briefed S. D. Bandaranayake to ask those questions.

S. D. Bandaranayake: You must name these people. Otherwise resign. You have become president of the TULF now. You have been planted in the cabinet by Tamil Nadu separatists.

Deputy Speaker Norman Waidyaratne stated that it was up to the minister to divulge the names or not. The House could not compel him.

S. D. Bandaranayake: What about the pack of lies you told Indira Gandhi?

Thondaman: The Member for Gampaha should withdraw the word lies.

S. D. Bandaranayake, I withdraw the word 'lies'

Thondaman: You have claimed that it was the Sinhala people who were being discriminated against. If that is true, who should be blamed? Do you mean to say successive Sinhala governments discriminated against the Sinhalese? If so, you should be ashamed of yourself for you too were part of the government.

Thondaman was invited by Parthasarathi to be present in New during the Commonwealth Leaders Conference which opened on November 24, 1983. In his address to the Commonwealth Leaders Conference President Jayewardene recalled meeting Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and showered praise on them both. He said he was a follower of the Mahatma's non-violence and of Nehru's non-alignment.

Thondaman met Indira the next day. He referred to President Jayewardene's speech and said: "President Jayewardene praised your father very much. I hope you are pleased".

Indira was furious. "That old man was not praising my father. He was telling the world that I am not living up to my father".

The CWC leader conveyed Indira's reaction to President Jayewardene and the President smiled.

Indira Gandhi impressed on Thondaman the urgency of working out a permanent solution to the Tamil problem. Narasimha Rao, whom Thondaman met next, also underlined the need for a political settlement.

A series of intense discussions were held in Delhi and on November 31 a day after the commonwealth parley was over, President Jayewardene and Indira Gan-

dhi had a long discussion. The basis for the famous Annexure C was agreed on at that meeting. There was only one point on which they failed to agree. Indira Gandhi backed the Tamil demand of a merger of the northern and eastern provinces. President Jayewardene opposed it. He argued that the Muslims and Sinhalese together formed the majority and he was worried about their future in a merged north-east province.

Mrs. Gandhi met the TULF leaders, Amirthalingam, Sivasithamparam and Sampanthan together with Thondaman, to consider the outcome of the talks with President Jayewardene. Amirthalingam accepted the solution but insisted that he could not face the Tamil people if he failed to obtain a merger. He suggested that suitable accommodation be incorporated in any agreement, or the Sinhalese areas excluded from the eastern province. For Amparai, the TULF suggested a separate unit, as it had a Muslim majority.

On his way back to Colombo, Thondaman met M. G. Ramachandran and briefed him on the formula worked out in Delhi, asking him to persuade the TULF to accept it. He failed to meet Karunanidhi. "He avoided meeting me", Thondaman told the Madras press.

On his return to Colombo, Thondaman held a press briefing at his ministry at Kollupitiya. He announced that the gap between the government and Tamil positions had narrowed to a single issue: merger "This is not a big issue to allow the country's future to be jeopardized", he said. "Let us rise above sectarian consideration and solve this once and for all".

He added: "Even if they fail to come to an agreement, the negotiations will continue. Mr. Parthasarathi will come here again. After all, the remaining issue is very simple. The TULF argues that the north and the east, recognised as Tamil-speaking for the use of the Tamil language in the courts and the administration, should be treated as a separate unit. President Jayewardene is opposed to such a merger. He is worried about the Sinhalese and Muslims in the eastern province".

Thondaman stressed that the TULF should accept the regional council proposal as the first step "Although it may not be the exact ideal, I feel the TULF should accept it as a solution to the vexed ethnic problem".

Thondaman said the TULF suffered from two main defects — lack of negotiating skill and, the absence of a single person with the capacity to decide on behalf of others. He said: "TULF leaders are good lawyers but the same cannot be said of their negotiating capacity The problem with the TULF is that no single person can decide for the whole party".

He contacted Parthasarathi on the phone and persuaded him to meet the TULF leaders and persuaded them to accept the formula, which took the shape of Annexure C.

Annexure C was a two-page document which Parthasarathi himself prepared. It contained the consensus that emerged during the five-month long discussions he had with President Jayewardene, his ministers, Thondaman and the TULF leaders. It contained 14 paragraphs and it was agreed that the Colombo government should place them before an All Party Conference which it would convene.

The formula, as contained in Annexure C, provided for the formation of a Regional Council for the Northern Province and another Regional Council for the Eastern Province. These councils would be established by the union of district development councils of each province. The regional councils would be elected and the leader of the party commanding the majority appointed by the President as chief minister of the region. The chief minister would set up the region's committee of ministers.

While the President, and parliament would have overall responsibility for all subjects not transferred to the region the regional councils would enjoy legislative and executive power in all subjects allocated to them.

The subjects included maintenance of internal law and order, administration of justice, social and economic development, cultural matters and land policy. The regional councils would be given taxation powers, high courts, a regional public service and regional police service. There would be a national policy for land settlement and laws covering the use of Tamil.

Annexure C was a development of the B-C pact which Jayewardene opposed, except for the fact that it did not provide for the merger of the north and east.

But when he called the All Party Conference President Jayewardene refused to present Annexure C as a government document saying he had not signed it. He did not want to earn the wrath of the Buddhist clergy who threatened to spearhead a campaign against it.

Thondaman called a conference of the Tamil groups — TULF, Tamil Congress, and the Hindu delegation — and decided to place Annexure C as a CWC document.

The Sinhala leadership thus lost another chance to solve the ethnic crisis, and this was the most costly lapse, the one that led to two-and-a-half years of bitter war, the Indian intervention and the creation of the North-East Provincial Council—with much wider powers.

CHAPTER 9

CABINET MINISTER LEADS A STRIKE

In 1984, Thondaman made history as the only cabinet minister who led a strike against his own government and won. The strike which took place during the first ten days of April also won equal pay for males and females, thus ending the 150 years of discrimination.

Plantation workers had always been the lowest paid in the country. When Thondaman's father Karuppaiah came to Ceylon in 1870 the daily wage was only 13 cents. It was raised to 33-37 cents for men and 25-29 cents for women in the latter part of that decade and later, when tea fetched a better price, the working days were increased, thus helping the workers to boost their earnings.

In 1929, the Wages Board set up under the Minimum Wages (Indian Labour) Ordinance fixed the wage at 45-49 cents for men and 36-39 cents for women. In 1945 the basic daily wage was 58 cents for men and 46 cents for women. Through the Collective Agreement of 1967 the basic daily wage was raised to Rs. 1.35 for men and Rs. 1.15 for women. In 1979 it went up to Rs. 2.51 and Rs. 2.32 respectively. This was raised again to Rs. 4.51 and Rs. 4.30 proportionately in 1982. In addition to the daily basic wage, the workers were also paid allowances. Thus in April 1984 the total daily wage of a worker was Rs. 18.01 for men and Rs. 15.03 for women.

An agitation had been building up in the plantation sector since 1982, because of the feeling that a bigger total wage hike was given to the public and private sectors from 1977 to 1984. According to the statistics computed by the CWC, a worker in the public sector got a rise of Rs. 361 a month while the plantation worker had got only Rs. 136.

The CWC took the lead in that agitation. In November 1983 it convened a meeting of all plantation trade unions at the Rural Industrial Development ministry office in Kollupitiya. Fourteen other unions sent their representatives. The UNP-controlled Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union did not respond. The meeting decided to agitate for a decent wage. They fixed their demand at Rs. 40 a day. That was the wage the government paid its agricultural farm labourer.

The Joint Committee of Plantation Trade Unions gave notice to the Janatha Estate Development Board and the State Plantation Corporation, biggest owners of the tea and rubber estates, that the workers would go on strike on April 1, if their demand for a wage rise was not granted.

After a cabinet meeting Thondaman mentioned the matter to President Jayewardene who expressed his sympathy with the demand. He also told the President of his intention to go to Europe in the last week of March. The President did not comment.

Thondaman left on his tour in the hope that President Jayewardene would find an acceptable solution. But neither the President nor the government took any action. The strike commenced on April 1 as planned. That was a Sunday. The actual extent of support for the strike could not be gauged. That evening President Jayewardene met representatives of the LJEJU led by Mahaweli Minister Gamini Dissanayake; the SPC Chairman Denham de Alwis and the JEDB Chairman Pemsit Seneviratne were present. At the talks, the SPC and JEDB agreed to raise the wage (for men and women) to Rs. 21.75.

A communique was rushed to the papers, radio and television with the request that it be given maximum publicity. The communique, issued by the Ministry of Plantation Industries said the pay rise was decided on during talks with the LJEJU and that it incorporated the historic decision to give equal pay to men and women. It said the wage hike would cost the government an additional Rs. 429 million. The festival advance had also been raised from Rs. 300 to Rs. 500.

The Joint Committee of Plantation Trade Unions met on April 2 and decided to reject the pay rise. Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, President of the LEWU, was vehement that they should reject it. "It's a conspiracy to kill our strike" he thundered.

About six lakhs of workers downed tools and over fifty percent of the LJEJU also joined them. Sellasamy issued a statement rejecting the government offer. He struck to the original demand of Rs. 40 per day.

On Tuesday, third day of the strike, the LJEJU claimed that most of its workers were working and the CWC claimed "one hundred percent success". Thondaman returned that evening. The next morning he attended the parliamentary group meeting where President Jayewardene told the MPs that if government were to agree for the Rs. 40 daily wage demand it would cost the government an additional Rs. 2,000 million a year. That would be disastrous in the prevailing economic situation. He indicated that he would issue an appeal to the workers to return, as the work stoppage was costing the country Rs. 60 million a day.

The LJEJU President, Mahaweli Minister Gamini Dissanayake, issued a statement asking the workers to return as some of their demands had already been won. He also referred to insinuations already in the air that the strike was politically motivated and aimed at helping the growing Tamil militancy in the northern and eastern provinces.

Thondaman attended the weekly cabinet meeting that morning and took a very firm stand. There was a verbal clash between him and Gamini Dissanayake in which strong words, such as 'sabotage' were used. President Jayewardene intervened and asked Plantation Industries Minister Montague Jayawickreme to mediate.

Jayawickreme had two rounds of talks the next day, Thursday, fifth day of the strike. He had two meetings — one with the officials of the JEDB, SPC and the Treasury. The second was with the 15 striking trade unions and the LJEJU.

At the second meeting the delegation representing the 15 unions submitted an interim two-point demand, CWC Vice-President Jaya Peri Sundaram told the minis-

ter that what they were demanding as an interim measure was the addition of the legally due cost of living index and price-wage supplement to the earlier wage of Rs. 16.30 a day. The cost of living index at the rate of 6 cents per point worked out to Rs. 8.04; the minimum price-wage supplement came to Rs. 2.70. These two amounts added to the current daily wage of Rs. 16.30 totalled Rs. 27.04.

Minister Jayawickreme heard this demand and sprang a surprise on the delegation, which comprised Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, Sellasamy, S. Nadesan and C. V. Velupillai. He said President Jayewardene wanted the unions to call off the strike for a settlement to be worked out. "Once the strikers resume work a committee will be appointed to look into their demands", Jayawickreme said. This annoyed the trade unions. They told the minister they were not prepared to call off the strike till a settlement was worked out.

Thondaman met President Jayewardene on Friday, to resolve the deadlock. He told President Jayewardene: "We will not call off the strike till a solution is found". He informed the President that Gamini Dissanayake's LJEWU was cracking up and large numbers of his union had joined the strike. President Jayewardene agreed to instruct the Plantation Industries Minister to continue with the negotiations.

But immense pressure was brought on President Jayewardene. The JEDB boss, Pemsit Seneviratne, met him and convinced him that CWC demands should not be met. He also told the press that the government had taken a firm decision not to yield to the striking unions. Sellasamy told the press that his union's belief was that President Jayewardene was sympathetic to the workers but accused the UNP-aligned LJEWU of "pressurising him (the President) for their selfish ends". The LJEWU hit back hard at the CWC, accusing it of following a "cutting the nose to spite the face" policy and said the CWC was bent on damaging the peaceful settlement they had reached.

Thondaman and Sellasamy met President Jayewardene on April 9, Monday, and assured him that the strike was not anti-government. "The CWC is committed to support the government and that commitment stands. We tried to obtain justice for the plantation workers

through negotiations. It is after all those avenues failed that we resorted to this last weapon", Thondaman explained.

He also pointed out that legal dues had been denied to plantation workers. What he was interested in, he said, was to get a commitment from the government that they would be met. He promised to call off the strike once that undertaking was given. President Jayewardene undertook to consider those matters.

Thondaman and Sellasamy left that evening for the plantations, on a whirlwind tour. He went from estate to estate, urging the workers to stand firm on the strike. He asked the Sinhala workers not to be misled by communal propaganda. "Whether you are a Sinhalese or Tamil, you are plantation worker. If the wage is increased all workers will benefit. So all plantation workers should be united", he said.

He returned to Colombo on April 10. A meeting had been fixed with President Jayewardene. Gamini Dissanayake was there. The government agreed to increase the daily wage by two rupees more. Thondaman agreed to call off the strike. A joint communique was issued that evening, announcing the government's decision to raise the daily wage to Rs. 23.75 and the CWC's undertaking to call off the strike.

That strike was a great victory for Thondaman. He told the press he saw no contradiction in the two roles he was playing — that of cabinet minister and trade union leader. "I've never felt or experienced any conflict between the two and there will be no conflict if you know the limits each role imposes on you", he said.

And Thondaman knew the limits. He never did lead the CWC into anti-government agitation or any collision course with the government. He used the trade union and the strike weapon to win the rights of the workers, nothing more.

Even in seeking a reasonable solution to the ethnic strife he knew his limitations. "I can go only as far as I do not lose credibility with the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese. It is a difficult balancing act", he told this writer before the All Party Conference (APC) in December 1983.

Annexure C which was finalised during the Commonwealth summit in New Delhi, ran into severe criticism from the Buddhist clergy and President Jayewardene quietly dropped it when he summoned the APC. The TULF and other Tamil groups wanted it to be placed before the APC as a conference document. Thondaman who called a conference of all the Tamil groups, offered to place it as a CWC document.

President Jayewardene summoned a meeting of eight political parties on Wednesday, December 21, 1983, to go into the question of summoning an All Party Conference for the purpose of discussing the growing problems of the country in regard to ethnic affairs and terrorism. The eight parties that were invited were the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, Ceylon Workers' Congress, the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the Democratic Workers' Congress, the Lanka Samasamaja Party, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party.

On receiving his invitation, Thondaman said the TULF should be invited too. Considering the Tamil problem without the TULF was like playing Hamlet without the Prince. His view was supported by most of the other parties, including the SLFP. The meeting decided that the TULF, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Nava Sama Samaja Party should be invited to the conference. President Jayewardene agreed to invite the TULF, but said that since the JVP and the NSSP were proscribed they could not be called.

The Indian High Commissioner G. K. Chhatwal, was flown to Madras with the invitation to the TULF. The conference met at the BMICH on January 10, 1984, and continued for six days. It was decided at the conference to enlarge participation and invite the religious representatives.

That was done mainly to include the Supreme Council of the Maha Sangha which wanted to take part.

The SLFP and MEP which took part the first two days of the conference decided to withdraw. After formal presentations of opinion, the conference set up two committees in February to consider the grievances of the committee and to evolve a system of government that

would help to remove them to examine the causes of ethnic violence and find ways to eradicate them.

In March, the APC met in plenary session and considered the three matters identified by the two committees. The first was the system of government required for devolving power. The second was the problem of the stateless. The third was ethnic violence and terrorism.

On the most sensitive subject of devolution there was consensus that power should be devolved from the centre to the district councils. The government took up the position that it would agree to the district councils and no more. The Tamils wanted regional councils. There was a deadlock regarding the unit of devolution.

The stateless problem had an easy passage. The threat at that time was of Indian interference. The Maha Sangha was especially concerned about it. The Mahanayakes felt that India would interfere only if Indians were in Sri Lanka. If Indian nationals were sent away and the balance made Lankan citizens, India would not have any cause or pretext. So the Mahanayakes thought. The result was the resolution they moved on statelessness.

The resolution read. "We should not have a category of persons who call themselves Indian. This can easily be achieved by sending back those who have to be sent back to India, as stated in the Sirima-Shastri Pact and by giving citizenship to the rest. Even though the numbers may be a little more, the Supreme Sangha Council declares that the council is not opposed to their being given citizenship in order to arrive at a solution to this problem".

There was general consensus that a final solution should be found for the stateless problem.

In finding a solution to the ethnic problem, the meeting dragged on till December without any definite outcome. The TULF had got tired of the whole exercise. It felt that the government was preparing for a military solution. On December 23, Amirthalingam told the press that the proposals were totally unacceptable to the Tamil people. The cabinet considered Amirthalingam's statement on December 26. There was an angry reaction from some of the ministers. Thondaman cautioned them. But President Jayewardene decided to discontinue the conference and not to implement the proposals.

The government spokesman, Minister Lalith Athulathmudali, summoned a press conference to announce the cabinet decision. When this writer asked Athulathmudali why they were discontinuing the conference, he said: "I also in favour of continuing the conference, but the people at the top decided otherwise".

Thondaman too was not happy. He told the writer "This is a big mistake. The chance of finding an internal solution has been missed. Now India has an opportunity to involve itself directly in the ethnic problem". And so it happened.

Thondaman was also not satisfied with the government's position that terrorism should be eliminated before a solution was worked out. On December 27, 1984, the CWC passed two resolutions on this subject. The first said that the CWC firmly believed in a negotiated settlement. The second, that the CWC rejected the government argument that terrorism should be eliminated before a solution could be worked out.

The Lankan government intensified military operations from January. There were frequent landmine attacks by the Tamil militant groups and a few cases in which Lankan army patrols were ambushed. That led to reprisals and cordon and search operations. Many Tamil families fled to India. Tension began to mount, both in the north and east—and in Tamil Nadu. Thondaman visited Tamil Nadu in the second week of March and sensed the growing tension there.

On his return he called on President Jayewardene. The meeting took place on March 15 and he told the President: "The situation in Tamil Nadu is extremely tense. The people are highly agitated. Unless some urgent steps are taken to better the situation, things may go out of hand".

He also briefed the President on the meeting he had with the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran. He said he had told MGR that Eelam was meaningless and that MGR shared that view.

Thondaman also summoned a press conference to tell the Lankan people, through the media, the actual situation in Tamil Nadu. "I want you to inform the people

of Sri Lanka of the intense feeling of resentment in Tamil Nadu of the military path Colombo is following to solve the Tamil question." He also spoke of the danger driving the Tamils to Tamil Nadu as refugees.

"I was told that the Lankan army and navy are helping the Tamils to flee to India. They perhaps think their problem will be solved that if all the Tamils flee to India. They fail to realise the danger that might flow. India will become involved in the Sri Lanka's problem. By your short-sightedness do not internationalise what is purely an internal problem", he warned the people through the press.

He also did his best to stem the flow of Tamil refugees to Tamil Nadu. While in India, he told the Tamil Nadu press: "Tamils are coming to Tamil Nadu because you are treating them well. If you stop that favoured treatment they will stop coming". He tried to discourage the Tamil Nadu people from giving an enthusiastic welcome and support to Lankan Tamil refugees.

In Sri Lanka, he adopted a different angle. He told the Lankan press on March 16: "Come what may, Tamils in Sri Lanka should not desert their homes and become refugees in India. They should stay on. Fleeing to India as refugees will only help the extremist Sinhalese who want to reduce that Tamil population in certain areas. You cannot run away and at the same time ask for your rights."

He added "By saying India should shut its doors to the refugees I am not trying to justify the atrocities or belittle the suffering of the Tamils in the last three months"

He also tried to revive political processes by submitting fresh proposals, which came to be known as the CWC proposals. In essence they amounted to Annexure C. He suggested that the disputed question of merger be settled after the regional councils were made to work.

By this time a significant change had occurred in the New Delhi power structure. Indra Gandhi had been assassinated. Her son, Rajiv, had been made Prime Minister. Parthasarathi had been pushed aside and the flamboyant Romesh Bhandari was foreign secretary. The youthful pilot-turned-Prime Minister was dreaming of

good relations with neighbouring countries. Rajiv sent Bhandari to Colombo in March, 1985, to solve the ethnic problem.

Bhandari met President Jayewardene and ministers Athulathmudali, Dissanayake, Ronnie de Mel, Thondaman and Devanayagam. Thondaman assessed Bhandari immediately. He told him directly that he had not understood the nature of the problem. Then he told President Jayewardene and Minister Athulathmudali that since Bhandari was better disposed towards the Lankan government, they should use that opportunity to work out a solution. They paid no heed.

Thondaman's statements in India and Sri Lanka irked the chauvinistic elements in the government. With the intention of capitalising on this, the SLFP threatened to move a vote of no-confidence against Thondaman in parliament. President Premadasa, then Prime Minister, immediately announced that the government would defend him. Premadasa adduced two reasons for that decision. He said: Thondaman was the "most faithful supporter of the UNP"; Thondaman was the "sheet anchor of the government's Tamil policy".

At that time Premadasa was Leader of the House. His office issued a statement explaining why the government had decided to defend Thondaman. It read: "There have been critical observations by some government members at recent internal meetings about Thondaman's utterances in India and Sri Lanka, but no one has criticised him so harshly as to warrant a "no faith" motion by the Opposition.

"The ruling UNP recognises the consistent support Mr. Thondaman has given President J. R. Jayewardene in particular and the UNP in general, from the days of the 'Attanagala meeting'. Moreover, Mr. Thondaman's recent utterances in Tamil Nadu on the Lankan Tamil refugee issue and the Tamil terrorist issue are highly appreciated within the government. Appropriate gratitude will be shown him at the appropriate time".

After this, Kotmale MP Ananda Dassanayake told a public rally that Thondaman should serve the Sinhalese people also. Thondaman who was present, replied immediately. He invited Dassanayake to witness the May Day

celebration at Bandarawela. "I wish to tell Mr. Dassanayake that there are more than 76,000 Sinhala estate workers who are members of the CWC. They are from Galle, Deniyaya and Avissawella. Although I am a member of the cabinet, I staged a strike to win the legitimate rights of plantation workers. That benefited all estate workers, irrespective of race".

Bhandari, on his return to New Delhi, had presented a rosy picture to Prime Minister Gandhi about the possibility of solving the ethnic conflict. In April, Rajiv said he saw a "light at the end of the tunnel". A few days later, on May 7, at a farewell reception the CWC accorded the departing Indian High Commissioner Chatwal, in Colombo, Thondaman caustically remarked: "The tunnel seems to be never ending and becomes increasingly darker.

"The PLO, which has used violence in its struggle, has been given recognition by the United Nations—of which both Sri Lanka and India are member states. Is there no way of adopting similar approaches in the Lankan situation to end this vast human tragedy?"

He also called for a change of role by India. He said: "India's role as a postman will not yield result. It must have direct talks with Sri Lanka".

That speech, widely publicised in Sri Lanka, India and other countries, took him to the centre of the controversy. The PLO Ambassador in Colombo, Dr. K. Abdul Rahman, took objection to his comparison of the Tamil militants with the PLO. Lankans were disturbed by his call to the Indian government for a change of role from that of a mediator to a participant.

Aruna Kulatunga of the Sun interviewed Thondaman about this matter. He asked:

"You have called for a new and radical approach towards solving the country's ethnic conflict. Could you explain the nature of the approach that should be adopted".

Thondaman replied: "I believe that both Sri Lanka and India should be fully involved in the negotiating process, to achieve any lasting solution to the problem. Right now, India's approach is one of 'expressing concern'; and Sri Lanka's

that it is an internal matter and no other country should be involved in seeking this solution. This must change. It has been going on far too long now. From the time of the incidents in July, 1983, India has been expressing concern at the so-called barbaric and inhuman situation in the country".

But India continued its stand of mediator. New Delhi invited a Lankan delegation of lawyers and jurists. The delegation, led by Dr. H. W. Jayewardene, flew to New Delhi in June, 1985, and met with Mr. K. Paraswaram, the Attorney-General of India, and others to consider the legal and constitutional aspects of devolving legislative and executive powers to appropriate units in Sri Lanka.

Both sides agreed that any settlement of the ethnic conflict should be within the parameters of sections 2 and 3 of Sri Lanka's constitution. Section 2 lays down that Sri Lanka is a unitary state; and section 3 that sovereignty is with the people, and inalienable. Agreement was also reached on the main outline of the structure and powers of the units of devolution.

Indian authorities thought sufficient progress had been achieved to bring the two contending parties face to face. Tamil militant groups refused to meet the Lankan delegation in Sri Lanka, and Sri Lanka preferred to have the meeting outside India. Bhandari suggested the Bhutanese capital of Thimpu as a neutral venue. Two rounds of talks were held in the Himalayan city in between the July and August, representatives of the Tamil groups and the Lankan delegation, led by Dr. H. W. Jayewardene.

The Tamil groups, which comprised the TULF, LTTE, PLOT, TELO, EROS and EPRLF took a common stand and insisted that four principles should be accepted for the talks to proceed. They were:

1. Recognition of Tamils as a distinct nationality.
2. Recognition of an identified Tamil homeland and the guarantee of its territorial integrity.
3. The right of self-determination of the Tamil nation.
4. The right of full citizenship of all Tamils living in Sri Lanka.

H. W. Jayewardene emphatically rejected these principles. He argued that the first three—distinct nationality, separate homeland and self-determination—taken together, amounted to reaffirmation of the demand for a separate state. The government was not in a position to accept them.

Of the fourth principle, he argued that it was not a matter for the TULF or Tamil militants. He also presented a draft proposal for setting up sub-national units to which powers could be devolved. Though the Tamil groups had indicated areas of agreement, they walked out of the conference charging that the Colombo government had violated the ceasefire agreement.

H. W. Jayewardene then had discussions in New Delhi and a comprehensive paper was prepared covering all issues. Jayewardene also had a meeting with Rajiv Gandhi. Thondaman welcomed this agreement and said it denoted a forward movement.

New Delhi passed on the draft agreement to the Tamil groups and it was felt that further clarifications were needed. A three-member delegation, led by H. W. Jayewardene, went to Delhi and had discussions with senior officials of the foreign ministry from September 10-13. The delegation gave details on how the proposals by the Lankan government would work in actual practice.

On September 30, Bhandari visited Colombo for further discussions. He met Thondaman and urged him to meet the Eelam National Liberation Front in Madras. That group, comprising the LTTE, TELO, EPRLF and EROS, was hesitant to agree to any settlement. Thondaman flew to Madras and met the ENLF leadership. At that meeting, Velupillai Prabhakaran of the LTTE, Sri Sabaratnam of TELO, V. Balakumar of EROS and K. Pathmanaha of the EPRLF were present. Ranjan Mathai of the Indian foreign ministry was there too. Thondaman pressed the necessity of a quick settlement and the urgent need for an end to the sufferings of the Tamil people.

The ENLF delegation went to New Delhi for talks, where Sri Lanka's proposals were discussed in detail. The

ENLF leaders told New Delhi they wanted an autonomous Tamil region to be able to give up their struggle for Eelam. Prabakaran was adamant. He said they would not abandon their struggle unless they got something substantial. The ENLF rejected the Lankan proposals as inadequate.

The TULF was not happy either with the Lankan proposals. But Bhandari was annoyed. He asked for some response from the TULF and after three months of hesitation, the TULF on December 1, submitted a detailed memorandum.

By this time the stage had been set for the prayer campaign—the campaign that won for the Indian Tamils the citizenship denied them 38 year ago.

CHAPTER 10

THE PRAYER CAMPAIGN

June 4, 1985, is another historic day in Thondaman's life. That was the last of the three days of prayers the CWC had organised to focus the country's attention on the need for a peaceful resolution of the bloody ethnic question and the ever-dragging stateless problem. Thondaman and Sellasamy had been participating in the three-hour poojas and prayer meetings. Thondaman was at Hatton on June 2; at Talawakelle on June 3; and at Nuwara Eliya on the final day. Sellasamy was in Colombo on the first day and at Galle on the two other days.

Thondaman on that third day, attended the morning pooja at the Sri Lingewarar temple, founded by Swami Murugesu in 1970, in the serene and salubrious environs of Nuwara Eliya. Thondaman, an ardent devotee, joined the other devotees and murmured an arohana when Swami Murugesu held up the pancharathi, a silver-plated lamp with five arms for burning camphor.

Just then, he felt some strange sensation stirring within him. Something urged him to make a dramatic announcement at the meeting after prayer.

It was out of a similar urge that the idea of a prayer campaign was born. Thondaman had been very troubled about the stateless problem since the All Party Conference collapsed in December, 1984. He raised the issue many times but President Jayewardene had repeatedly told him that he would solve it with the ethnic problem.

The ethnic problem itself was assuming a serious turn. The Anuradhapura massacre on May 21 in which 147 civilians were mowed down enraged the Sinhalese. Two busloads of LTTE fighters had entered the sacred

Buddhist city and sprayed the crowd indiscriminately machinegun fire.

May 24 was a Friday, a holy day for the Hindus. Thondaman observes Fridays very strictly. He eats only vegetarian food. He prays in the morning and in the evening, before dinner. That day he found it difficult to concentrate on his evening prayers. He retired to bed with a troubled mind. The escalating ethnic tension and the government's dragging out of the stateless problem were disturbing him.

He knew he could not seek a solution to the stateless problem unless the ethnic tensions subsided. He also knew that he could not resort to the strike weapon to win back citizenship rights because that would spew communal violence and spur army repression.

"Suddenly I woke up", Thondaman recalls something had struck me like a flash: 'Why not a prayer campaign?' I heard it as though someone was saying it to me. I got out of bed, washed my face and prayed".

The seed of the prayer campaign was born.

Thondaman summoned the CWC Working Committee on May 29 and told the members of his new idea. He explained that prayer and meditation would help to transform the charged atmosphere. He said the prayer meetings would demonstrate the power of the CWC. There was an immediate response. A circular was sent to all estate committees.

Thondaman gave the press three reasons for the CWC prayer meetings. The first was to create a spiritual atmosphere in the country, so that people could not resort to violence. The second was to welcome the New De'hi agreement for talks between the Lankan government and Tamil militant groups. The third was to focus attention on the plight of stateless persons.

The estate workers were enthusiastic. The estate managements were perturbed. They acceded to the CWC request to adjust working hours. The government was not concerned.

The workers gathered in the morning at a central place, or at the kovils and prayed. They meditated,

sang hymns, listened to religious discourses. They prayed till mid-day and reported for work at 1 p.m. Everything went off peacefully. No incidents were reported.

But on the last day, at Nuwara Eliya, Thondaman made his dramatic announcement. He said: "I have decided to step down from the CWC leadership if no solution is found to the stateless problem by December 31, 1985. If no solution is found by that date, I will consider that my leadership and policies have failed and I will give way to a new leadership which can take over and alter the CWC's policies and adopt a more dynamic approach towards a solution".

That announcement jolted the CWC membership. None knew Thondaman was to make that statement. He had told no one. He had no time to tell anyone. The CWC membership was taken aback. They rallied to him. The estate committees called an emergency meeting and passed resolutions of confidence in his leadership. The little fissures that had appeared were soldered. The CWC was shaken into solidarity.

President Jayewardene and National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali were themselves troubled. Some of the government leaders were upset. They made discreet inquiries from journalist friends who had ready access to Thondaman. They were not sure how serious Thondaman was. They preferred to wait and watch before reacting.

Thondaman was delighted by the CWC response. "My people have strengthened my hand", he said, adding: "It's my duty to convert this strength into achievement".

But he was worried about the government's silence. And also that the spontaneous unity shown by the CWC might be dissipated. Pressmen and analysts were becoming skeptical about Thondaman's resignation threat. So he decided to write to President Jayewardene about his June 4 speech.

The letter was sent on November 19. It was a formal letter. It drew attention to the stateless problem and said the CWC had been expecting it to be solved since the UNP came to power in 1977. The President was reminded

of the solemn promises he had made at every CWC convention. The letter also referred to the decision of the All Party Conference in December 1984, where even the Maha Sangha had agreed that statelessness should be ended. The letter concluded by referring to the June 4 announcement.

President Jayewardene had participated in the Badulla, Nuwara Eliya, Colombo and Kandy conventions where he had repeated his intention to end the curse of statelessness. He had not only called statelessness "immoral" and "degrading", but described it as a blot on Lanka's civilisation,

But his sensitiveness to Sinhala opinion had held him back. He wanted to carry Sinhala opinion and especially the Buddhist clergy with him. The All Party Conference convened in December 1983 gave him that opportunity. The representatives of the Maha Sangha and Buddhist associations were violently opposed to the Tamil demand of a homeland in the merged northern and eastern provinces. They were also opposed to granting the Tamil language official status.

Government delegates and the leftists played deftly on fears of an Indian invasion to wrest an agreement to grant citizenship to 94,000 stateless Indian Tamils and their descendants. "As long as Indian Tamils are stateless, India has a pretext to interfere in Sri Lanka's affairs", they were told. They gulped down that bait.

At the conclusion of the meeting on December 3, 1984, the press was told to await a statement from the Maha Sangha. Athulathmudali gave a press briefing in the BMICH lobby to announce the Maha Sangha's support in ending statelessness. While he was explaining the decision the door opened. A group of bhikkhus, led by the Ven. Madihe Pannaseeha Maha Thera was seen waiting. Athulathmudali went up to them.

"We want to meet the press", the Ven. Pannaseeha Thera said.

"You are welcome to do so", said Athulathmudali and led them to the head table. He took a seat on the side.

The Ven. Pannaseeha Thera made a statement: "We like to address the press on today's decisions. We agreed today to recommend that the government grants citizenship to the 93,000 stateless persons". He then explained their decision. He said India was trying to interfere in Lankan affairs. India would have the right to do so only if Indian citizens were in Sri Lanka. Stateless persons would give India such a pretext. If they made the stateless Lankan citizens India would have no ground to interfere in Lankan affairs, the Ven. Madihe Thera said.

On December 28, the APC failed on the question of the unit of devolution. The government was adamant on two separate provincial councils, one for the north and another for the east. The TULF insisted on a merged Tamil-speaking province. With collapse of the APC, the decision to grant citizenship to the stateless was also pigeon-holed.

President Jayewardene did not reply to the November 19 letter. Thondaman decided to implement his prayer campaign program. He directed the CWC to send a circular to all estate committees, informing them of the three-month prayer campaign fixed to begin on January 12, Thai Pongal day. The circular also said that an joint meeting of the executive and national councils had been fixed for December 3, at the Colombo head office. Its purpose was to map out a new strategy to win the rights denied to the plantation Tamils.

"We have to win the rights still denied to us and, more than that, we must be able to live with dignity and self-respect in this country as citizens, enjoying all equality before the law and in the political, economic and social life of the nation", the circular said.

Thondaman revealed an inkling of his thinking and strategy in this circular. He said he had given a great deal of thought since the three days of prayer in June and had become increasingly convinced that the path of prayer was what the CWC should adopt at that stage of the struggle. The circular dealt at length on the importance of prayer and how all major religions and Mahatma Gandhi had advocated it.

The circular concluded by saying that CWC members should consider a three-month spell of prayer beginning on Thai Pongal day and ending on Sinhala and Tamil

New Year day, April 14. The circular cleverly left out details of the campaign.

The government took the circular lightly: When pressmen questioned Athulathmudali about it he joked: "We must thank the CWC for praying for all of us. Isn't prayer good?"

That light-heartedness vanished when Athulathmudali read the CWC declaration on the night of December 3. The declaration was adopted at the joint meeting of the executive and national councils that morning. It was a brief meeting, starting at 10 a.m. and ending before noon, Thondaman's impassioned speech was the main item. He said the CWC backed the UNP at the 1977 and 1982 elections in the hope that President Jayewardene would solve the citizenship problem. But after eight years of UNP rule the problem remain unresolved. The solution to the ethnic problem was also being dragged out.

He said the CWC was left with no alternative but to wage a struggle. The struggle could not be an armed one such as that being waged in the north and east. The Indian Tamils lived among Sinhala people. Armed struggle would only spell disaster to plantation Tamils. And, he said, the CWC had never believed in violent struggle. They believed in ahimsa, in non-violence. He was convinced that prayer was the best weapon available to the CWC.

Thondaman explained that while struggling for citizenship rights, it would be prudent also to pray for national peace, amity and reconciliation. "We also must learn to rise above our own considerations. We must learn to think of the national interest", he implored.

There was general agreement about the prayer campaign. A resolution was adopted accepting Thondaman's proposal to declare 1986 a year of peace, amity and national reconciliation.

Copies of the declaration were handed to reporters at the CWC head office at about 5 p.m. Copies were also delivered to newspaper offices, the SLBC and Rupavahini before dusk.

Thondaman had a hunch that the newspapers would not carry the declaration in full. He directed the CWC media director, Subramaniam to have publish it as a full page advertisement in the Tamil daily Virakesari.

There was discussion and uncertainty in some of the main newspaper offices. The chairman of one of the groups walked up to the desk of the reporter typing the story.

"What does Thonda want to do?" he asked the reporter.

"He wants to have morning prayers".

"When does he want to pray?"

"From 7 a.m. till noon".

"Then?"

"The workers will work after that".

"That's not prayers. That's a strike".

"Strike in the garb of prayer", the reporter replied.

"They should not be paid for the half day they pray".

"Thonda says he wants them to be paid as for the time they pray".

"Then it's a paid-for prayer".

The chairman wanted a copy of the declaration. The reporter took a photocopy and gave him the original.

The chairman told the editor to hold back the story until he got clearance for it.

Only two Tamil dailies ran the prayer campaign story the next day — December 4. All other national dailies kept the story out.

December 4 was a Wednesday. Thondaman went to the weekly cabinet meeting as usual at 8 a.m. President Jayewardene held up a copy of the declaration sent to a

newspaper group and asked: "Thonda, so you have decided on a prayer campaign?"

"Yes", said Thondaman. "I will have to do something to maintain my credibility. The youth are already up in arms. They say I have failed to get the government to solve the stateless problem for eight years".

President Jayewardene smiled.

Thondaman pressed on: "The **Daily News** did not carry the story. I want to insert a full page advertisement. Please tell Bodinagoda to accept it".

"That's left to them. I don't interfere in these things", President Jayewardene declared.

The Lake House group declined to accept the advertisement. The Upali group did the same. Only the Sun group accepted it and carried it the next day. The Communist Party daily, **Aththa**, the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party daily **Dinarasa** and the Jaffna-based Tamil dailies **Eelanadu** and **Eelamurasu** accepted the advertisement. The fortnightly **Lanka Guardian** carried it too. The Madras edition of the **Indian Express** and its sister paper the **Malai Murasu** also carried the advertisement. **The Hindu** declined to publish it.

Thondaman waited a few days for the press reaction. The newspapers did not comment. There seemed to be a conspiracy of silence. He then decided to mount a massive publicity campaign. Thousands of leaflets were printed in English, Sinhala and Tamil and distributed islandwide.

There was great enthusiasm among plantation workers. There was also great excitement. The estate workers prepared themselves for a prolonged struggle. Many collected foodstuffs—sufficient to last three months. They began to grasp the real import of the prayer campaign. Even the dissident youths closed ranks.

Among the government ranks there was uneasiness. The Sinhala extremists were incensed. They took the seventh of the fifteen-para declaration as a direct attack on them. The seventh para read: "The talk of war is reminiscent of the cry of Dharma Yuddha—a kind

of Holy War by certain extremist politicians which led to the holocaust of July, 1983. This cry of Dharma Yuddha was first mooted on page 201 in the book 'Save the Buddha Sasana', published by the Seruwila Sacred City Development Society. Is this slogan raised again?". They said this was a direct attack on Industries Minister Cyril Mathew. Back stage moves were mounted to discredit the prayer campaign.

Thondaman decided to thwart this Sinhala chauvinism by writing to President Jayewardene. He knew the President could be swayed by the extremists. It had happened before.

When Thondaman met President Jayewardene soon after the All Party Conference had recommended the ending of statelessness he persuaded him that it was the proper environment to enact such legislation. The President had readily agreed, but the extremists then pressed him to wait till the end of the All Party meeting.

The CWC chief wrote to President Jayewardene on December 17, a Tuesday. It was a brief letter. The first para referred to the letter of November 19 which conveyed Thondaman's June 4 statement. The second para was about the CWC declaration, a copy of which was enclosed.

That letter set matters moving. The next morning, when Thondaman was dressing to attend the weekly Wednesday cabinet meeting, the telephone rang. President Jayewardene was on the other end.

"Thonda! I received your letter. I'd like to speak to you. Why not drop in at Ward Place. We can go together to the cabinet meeting.

Thondaman got into the President's vehicle and they drove together to the cabinet office, led by a pilot car and followed by security.

They talked in the car.

President Jayewardene opened the conversation. He said: "I understand your problem. I know you will lose credibility if you fail to get the citizenship problem solved. I am anxious to find a solution too".

Thondaman said he had never questioned or suspected the President's sincerity. But he was worried that everything was being so delayed. Both agreed the stateless problem should be solved immediately.

They walked together into the cabinet room. President Jayewardene sitting at the head of the oval teak table. Thondaman took his seat beside Minister of State Anandatissa de Alwis. Before taking up the agenda President Jayewardene informed the cabinet about the CWC's proposed prayer campaign and his own determination to solve the stateless problem immediately. Prime Minister Premadasa (now President) readily supported an immediate solution. So did Athulathmudali and Ranil Wickremasinghe. The extremist wing, led by Cyril Mathew, was silent.

President Jayewardene announced that the government had accepted in principle the stateless problem must be ended immediately. No details were discussed, no figures considered, consensus was reached in a few minutes.

After the cabinet meeting the President asked Thondaman to drive back with him. Athulathmudali joined them. Thondaman sat between the President (on his left) and Athulathmudali (on his right). It was agreed that they and the officials concerned should meet for a detailed discussion at Ward Place the next morning, December, 19.

Sellasamy, Jaya Peri Sundaram and Devaraj accompanied Thondaman to the talks. Athulathmudali was associated with the President. Foreign Secretary W. T. Jayasinghe and officials of the Immigration and Emigration Department were also present.

President Jayewardene first explained the purpose of the meeting. He said the cabinet had agreed the previous day to end the problem of statelessness once and for all. The problem before them was to work out a formula to achieve that objective. The entire morning was spent reviewing the progress and problems associated with the implementation of the 1964 Sirima-Shastri pact.

The pact and the subsequent agreement of 1974 envisaged India granting citizenship to 600,000 and Sri

Lanka to 375,000 of the estimated total of 975,000 Indian Tamils who were in Sri Lanka in 1964. Only 504,000 had applied for Indian citizenship. India announced at the expiry of the 15-year period that it would grant citizenship only to those who had applied.

Thondaman argued that 94,000 Indian Tamils had elected to live in Sri Lanka and they could not be thrown out into the sea. "They should be absorbed. They should be granted Lankan citizenship", he argued.

Athulathmudali tendered a different argument. He said though 506,000 had applied for Indian citizenship only 421,207 had been granted it, leaving a balance of 84,793. He argued that the granting of Lankan citizenship to the 94,000 should be linked with India granting citizenship to the 84,000.

The CWC delegation opposed this link-up, which Thondaman later described as "arithmetical calculations". He implored the President to approach it as a human problem and grant citizenship to all the 94,000 immediately. Not much progress could be achieved. They decided to meet again at 4 o'clock that evening.

The evening session saw fresh complexities. The CWC delegation said that apart from giving citizenship to the 94,000 Sri Lanka should complete granting citizenship to its quota of 375,000. Sri Lanka had granted citizenship to 197,535, leaving a balance of over 177,000. Athulathmuadli countered by saying that about 80,000 of the plantation Tamils who had been granted Indian citizenship were in Sri Lanka awaiting repatriation.

He also made reference to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's latest position that India would not accept people of Indian origin who were to return to India unless Lankan refugees could return to Sri Lanka.

Thondaman said he was opposed to Rajiv's linking the repatriation of Indians in Sri Lanka with the Lankans in India. That was immoral, he said and added: "I will take that up with Rajiv when I meet him next week".

The meeting ended on that happy note. Thondaman was gratified that the government had begun to pay attention to the stateless problem.

He left for India the next day, December 20. He was going first to his home town to attend a private function there; then on to Delhi and finally to Bombay, for the centenary celebration of the Indian Congress, a three-day affair beginning on December 28.

At Trichi, he met the Indian press as usual and announced his opposition to Rajiv's linking of repatriates and refugees. He said that under the Indo-Lanka agreements of 1964 and 1974 India was bound to take back all those who applied for Indian citizenship. "If India fails to honour her commitments she will lose credibility in the eyes of the world", he said.

On Tuesday, December 24, Thondaman was invited to join Rajiv the next day in Madras, so that they could travel together to New Delhi. Thondaman accepted the invitation. They flew together in the Indian Air Force plane and in the two hours from Madras to Delhi they discussed both citizenship and ethnic problems.

Thondaman urged that the citizenship problem and refugee problem were both human problems. "We are talking about human beings, not chattals", Thondaman told Rajiv; the approach should be to solve the problems in a humanitarian way. "There is no question of barter", he kept repeating. Rajiv appreciated that position.

Thondaman also told him that by linking the two questions he would only delay the granting of citizenship till the ethnic problem was solved. Rajiv nodded in agreement and said he would ponder that point.

Thondaman also impressed on Rajiv that he should play a more positive role in the ethnic issue. India should bring about the unity of Tamil militants. He gave the Indian Prime Minister a copy of the CWC proposal to the All Party Conference.

On his return from the All India Congress centenary celebrations Thondaman wanted to meet Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran. An appointment had been given for January 9 1986. Thondaman went to the office of the Lankan Deputy High Commissioner, Gautamadasa, in Madras. He decided to travel in the high commission car; but he was told that MGR

had wished he would not fly the Lion flag on his car for security reasons. Thondaman declined to heed that advice. He informed MGR that he was coming to see him as a minister of Sri Lanka and would fly the Lion flag. And he did.

Thondaman briefed MGR about the proposed prayer campaign his discussions with President Jayewardene and with Rajiv. He asked the Tamil Nadu chief minister to use his influence to persuade Rajiv to accept the Indian citizens back.

"I need your assistance", Thondaman told MGR.

"I assure you my full backing", MGR promised.

But Thondaman was a little taken aback when MGR asked him whether he thought the prayer campaign would not really work. Thondaman replied that violence would not yield quick results either, and would bring a lot of destruction.

Panruddi Ramachandran, who was with them, led Thondaman away. "He (MGR) is a sick man. We must not argue with him".

Thondaman planned to return to Colombo at 4.30 p.m. on January 10. His flight was delayed by over six hours. He reached home around 10.30 p.m. The next morning, a Saturday, he went to meet Athulathmudali at his defence ministry office at 9 a.m. Sellasamy, Jaya Peri Sundram and Devaraj accompanied him. They found the Indian High Commissioner J. N. Dixit and Second Secretary S. Venkatachari (in charge of the granting of Indian citizenship) seated with Athulathmudali. Thondaman was somewhat taken aback. He did not expect Dixit there. Then Thondaman realised that many things had happened in the three weeks he was away in India.

There had been a sustained propaganda built up against the prayer campaign. The media barrage was prompted by two incidents that took place on December 20, the day Thondaman left for India. The Island that morning carried a single column story on the talks of the two previous days which, it said, were extensive. It said, the two issues discussed were statelessness and the National Reconciliation Committee.

Opposition Leader Anura Bandaranaike, who had also got wind of the talks, raised the question of the CWC declaration and the prayer campaign in parliament on December 20, at adjournment time. He prefaced his remarks with a glowing tribute to Thondaman. "I have the highest regard for him (Thondaman)", he began and added "because he is one of the cleverest politicians this country has ever produced. I really raise my hat to him because he knows how to play his part and when to play his part. He is a master at the art of timing..... No one has better timing than my friendHe is now praying. He is just about to start praying before he goes on his long trip to Nirvana".

Bandaranaike then made clever use of the declaration to highlight Thondaman's conflict with the extremist section within government. He read the para which spoke about the Dharma Yuddha cry first mooted in the book "Save the Buddha Sasana" and commented: "I think it is having a shot at the Member for Kelaniya". Kelaniya was represented by Industries Minister Cyril Mathew.

Bandaranaike also highlighted the practical effect the prayer campaign would have on the tea industry. "When you pray from 7 a.m. to 12 noon you cannot pluck tea. He has cleverly selected this time. You (Thondaman), have very cleverly and brilliantly selected these five hours of the best picking. The best time for plucking tea is between 7 a.m. and 12 noon".

The state owned Daily News delivered the first punch. It headlined a front page three-column story by Amal Jayasinghe: CWC's call perturbs management.....tradeprayer session a jinx on tea". The thrust of the story was to highlight the fact that the morning prayer would affect plucking and the production slide would hurt the tea industry.

The Island wrote an editorial, "Praying or preyiny", on December 24, which argued that the prayer meetings were in fact a strike and that the CWC was adopting this strategy to twist the government's arm.

The Weekend of December 29 led with the story "Pray and be Damned — Government's answer to Thonda's prayers". It was a very provocative story. It said the government owned State Plan-

tations Corporation and the Janatha Estates Development Board, which together owned 70 percent of Sri Lanka's tea estates, had advised the government to cut the pay of those who participated in the prayer campaign. It quoted SPC chairman Pemsit Seneviratne as saying that 70 percent of the plucking was done in the morning. It also said Raja Seneviratne, General Secretary of the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union, had claimed that the estate unions were having talks with the police and the army about security on the estates.

Sellamy reacted instantly. He said their intention was not to hurt the economy. The CWC had asked the estate managements to adjust the working hours. In June, on the three days the workers prayed, they plucked in the evenings and had exceeded the normal day's pickings. He warned that if their pay was cut the workers would pray the entire day.

Press agitation mounted to a crescendo in the first week of January. The Sun ran a front page lead under the headline 'Govt. orders pay cuts, union warns of total stoppage — tough line on CWC campaign'. It was a report of the happenings on January 1, 1986.

That morning President Jayewardene, who was also Minister of State Plantations had a meeting with Chairman, State Plantations Corporation and Chairman, Janatha Estates Development Board. Both officials argued for a hard line. President Jayewardene acceded. Their argument was that unless the campaign was 'nipped in the bud' it would become a permanent problem.

The chairman went back to their offices and dictated similar circulars to be dispatched to the estate managements immediately. The circulars instructed estate superintendents to pay only a half-days wages to workers who reported at 1 p.m. — and not to offer work to those reporting after 1 o'clock.

The Sun contacted Sellamy for his reactions. He told them: "We expect the management to pay a full day's wage as they did during the three days of prayers in June".

He followed it up with a letter to President Jayewardene in which he warned: "If the management

persists in this, workers who want to participate in the morning prayer sessions may be tempted to continue it in the afternoon".

Sellasamy also took the opportunity to apprise President Jayewardene of another development. Since the last week in December the UNP-controlled Lanka Jatika Estate Workers' Union (LJEWU) headed by Mahaweli Minister Gamini Dissanayake had become active. The LJEWU had instructed its workers not to join the prayer campaign and Dissanayake had told the *Island* and the *Daily News* that prayers alone would not solve problems and that "If prayers alone can solve problems I will spend the entire day in a kovil".

Raja Seneviratne, General Secretary, LJEWU, said the plantation workers should not join the prayer meetings. He alleged that Thondaman, though a minister, was acting against the government.

Government supporters also got the smaller unions to issue statements condemning the prayer campaign. One of them, Jinadasa Jayasinghe, President the People's Labour Congress, called the prayer campaign "a big joke".

Sellasamy also mentioned attempts to break up prayer meetings and warned that it would create a difficult situation.

The next few days saw a virulent press campaign. The *Island*, *Divaina*, *Sun* and *Davasa* were abrasive in tone. They maintained that the prayer campaign was in fact a strike. They maintained that the CWC was heading for a confrontation and preparing for an all-out war with the government. They also insinuated the CWC was trying to assist the Tamil militants. Editorially they warned the CWC of the dangers involved in the prayer campaign and accused Thodaman of 'politicking'.

The *Island's* editorial of January 4 focused attention on the communal element. Claiming that the prayer was never communal, it said, the CWC membership was predominantly Tamil and the hill country Tamils had been the targets of attack in 1977, 1981 and 1983. "In such a context is it not obvious that the CWC's present campaign will only reduce its membership to

fodder in a future communal holocaust, frightening though such a prospect is?"

The editorial also adduced two other arguments: that the government which took a hard line against strikes in 1980 and refused to re-employ them should not take a lenient view of the CWC prayer campaign; and that no trade union should be permitted to hold a country to ransom.

While the press and the unions were whipping up tension, the government started secret negotiations with India about a possible solution to the stateless problem. The negotiations actually started on January 9, Thursday, though the Indian High Commission statement issued on January 15 fixes the date as January 11. On Thursday, Athulathmudali telephoned Dixit and told him that President Jayewardene had decided to find a once-and-for-all solution to the stateless problem and wanted India to take part.

"This is a problem between Sri Lanka and India", he told Dixit, "as the 1964 and 1974 agreements are between the two governments. This time too, both governments should sort it out".

Dixit told Athulathmudali that India would be pleased to help Sri Lanka in this matter and asked what India was required to do.

Athulathmudali said India should stand by its commitment to take back the 506,000 persons who had applied for Indian citizenship. That would help the Lankan government to blunt the opposition, mainly from the buddhist clergy and the SLFP. Dixit offered to discuss it with his government.

Athulathmudali then told Dixit of Saturday's meeting with Thondaman and invited Dixit to be present. Dixit accepted.

Athulathmudali also referred to Gandhi's statement in Tamil Nadu in November linking repatriation of Indian passport holders in Sri Lanka with that of the Lankan Tamil refugees in India. He asked India to review that position. Dixit replied that Gandhi's position was already under review after Thondaman had appealed to him. He

promised to contact Delhi and let him know the result the next day.

Dixit telephoned Indian Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari that evening. Bhandari said he would consult Gandhi and contact him.

Bhandari phoned back the same night that Gandhi was pleased about Sri Lanka's wish to solve the stateless problem finally and agreed to separate the two categories of repatriation. "If we can get the stateless problem out of our way, it will be easier to tackle the ethnic problem", Bhandari told Dixit.

Dixit passed on the information to Athulathmudali immediately. The Minister said it would help the government immensely.

Thondaman was astonished when he saw Dixit and Venkatachari seated with Athulathmudali at the defence ministry office at 9 a.m. on Saturday. Thondaman went with Sellasamy, Jaya Peri Sundaram and Devaraj. Athulathmudali was very, very official at that meeting. He announced that President Jayewardene had decided to solve the stateless problem and that the purpose of that meeting was to identify the issues. He conveyed the impression that the purpose of that meeting was only to identify the problems that need settlement, not negotiation.

Despite this, Thondaman made a brief statement. He made the CWC stand very clear. He said the people of Indian origin had been without citizenship for 38 years and the 1964 and 1974 agreements, which were intended to end statelessness, had failed mainly because Sri Lanka had failed to implement them speedily. Innumerable, unwanted and unnecessary impediments had been created by the bureaucracy to prevent the Indian Tamils from getting their citizenship.

He said Sri Lanka had violated even the basic principle of voluntariness embodied in the 1964 agreement. He pointed out that only 400 000 had applied for Indian citizenship at the start. But Sri Lanka began to reject such applications on a mass scale, another lakh of persons had applied for Indian citizenship. He ended with the demand that every stateless person resident in Sri Lanka should be granted citizenship immediately. The matter was as simple as that, he said.

Athulathmudali took a legalistic stance. He argued the agreements were between India and Sri Lanka. Both governments were bound by those agreements. They had reached agreement within that framework. He said they should proceed to identify the problem areas and find solution for them.

They identified three problem areas. The first was the question of the 94,000, the shortfall in the Indian quota of 600,000.

Thondaman said they were Sri Lanka's responsibility. They had not applied for Indian citizenship and India could not be forced to accept them. Furthermore, they had applied for Lankan citizenship, though their applications had been rejected. "They can't be thrown out of Sri Lanka. So Sri Lanka should accept them".

Athulathmudali agreed. All agreed that the 94,000 should be added to the Lankan share. This raised Lanka's quota from 375,000 to 469,000. Under the 1964 agreement Sri Lanka had accepted 300,000 and under the 1974 pact another 75,000 persons.

The second problem was the non-fulfilment of the Sri Lanka's obligation. Sri Lanka should have granted citizenship to 375,000 persons in the allotted 15 years. By January, 1986 Sri Lanka had granted citizenship to 197,535. There was a balance of 177,465. It was agreed that this number too should be granted citizenship.

The third problem was India's commitment to 506,000 of the stateless who had applied for Indian citizenship. Of them India had given citizenship only to 421,207. Dixit agreed to accept the balance. Thondaman then raised the question of repatriation of the 80,000 who had already been given Indian citizenship.

Dixit announced: "I have been informed by our foreign secretary that the Prime Minister has agreed to take them back".

"Without linking their repatriation with the Lankan Tamils in India" Thondaman asked.

"Yes", Dixit replied.

"Splendid", Thondaman rejoiced.

Thondaman then told Athulathmudali and Dixit of his plea to Gandhi on their flight from Madras to Delhi.

"I never expected Rajiv to agree to my request so swiftly", Thondaman said.

This light-hearted chat soon stopped. Athulathmudali suggested that the CWC should wait until some of the repatriation and citizenship issues were finally sorted out with the Indian government.

"We have waited too long. We can't wait any longer". Thondaman replied.

With that they broken up.

Thondaman told pressmen that evening that they had identified the problem areas and had agreed in principle to end statelessness for ever.

"Will the prayer campaign start on Thai Pongal day as scheduled?", a newsman asked. Thai Pongal was on January 14.

"Definitely", Thondaman replied and added "the agreement in principle was reached eight years ago. What we are now asking is a solution".

Why do you want to have the prayer campaign after the government has agreed to find a solution", the reporter asked again.

Thondaman smiled. "The trouble with Lankan governments is implementation. They agree, they even enact laws, but they do not implement".

The next day, January 12, was a Sunday. The emergency meeting of the planning committee had been fixed for 9 a.m. at the CWC head office. Thondaman went to the office at 8 a.m. as usual. Many people were there to meet him. They had varied problems. The main complaint was that the estate managements had started to harass them. Some said members of the UNP oriented Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union had threatened them. Others said communal tension was mounting.

"Are you all afraid?", Thondaman asked a group of workers from Avissawella who complained of threats.

They nodded.

"You call yourself men?", he shouted. "If you are all scared we are destined for ever to be slaves".

Thondaman briefed the planning committee of his discussions with Athulathmudali the previous day.

He said Athulathmudali was trying delaying tactics again. All agreed that they should not allow that. They wanted to continue with the prayer campaign until the government agreed to enact special legislation to end statelessness.

It was a very warm day and the room was stuffy. Thondaman felt unwell and started perspiring.

"I feel giddy", he said.

The meeting ended abruptly. Thondaman's personal physician, Dr. S. Ramachandran was summoned immediately. He advised Thondaman to enter hospital. Thondaman was rushed to the Navaloka Hospital nearby and admitted to a third floor suite.

But even there Thondaman could not rest. He was persuaded however to lie in bed. Seated by were CWC legal consultant S. P. Amarasingham, Jaya Peri Sundaram and Devaraj. They were discussing the CWC proposal to be submitted to the government that evening.

The CWC proposal was simple and direct. It urged the government to enact special legislation declaring all persons of recent Indian origin Sri Lankan citizens from the date of passage of the legislation.

Sellasamy went to Thondaman in hospital that evening. Together they reviewed the arrangements for the prayer campaign. The arrangements were being supervised by Sellasamy. There was great enthusiasm among the membership. They realised that it was a life and death struggle.

The CWC was encouraged by the support being offered by other plantation trade unions. All efforts of the LJEWU

to create a sense of fear in the estate workers failed. Even their own members offered support to the prayer campaign.

That night two important visitors called on Thondaman. The first was Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa. It was a very formal meeting. Premadasa enquired about Thondaman's health.

"Doctors say I'm all right. What I need is some rest, an enforced rest", Thondaman laughed.

"I'm glad to hear you are all right", Premadasa.

He sat on the bedside chair, held Thondaman's hand and talked about Thondaman's grandson who was standing by.

They did not talk about the prayer campaign or the stateless problem.

The next meeting was purely businesslike. Athulathmudali walked into the room at 9.25 p.m. He went straight to the subject.

"I came to collect the CWC proposals", he said, after a brief enquiry about Thondaman's health.

"I have them here," Thondaman replied.

He signalled to Jaya Peri Sundaram to hand over the copy of the written proposal. Athulathmudali began reading it.

"Our proposal is very simple and practical" Thondaman intervened. "We want the government to declare by special legislation that all persons of Indian origin are citizens of Sri Lanka with immediate effect".

Athulathmudali looked astonished. He said that would put the government on the mat. The buddhist clergy would revolt. The SLFP would mount a massive agitation.

He also argued that acceptance of the CWC proposal meant that even those who had applied for Indian citizenship and were awaiting it had to be made Lankan citizens.

Thondaman explained to him that those people were still in Sri Lanka and unless they decided voluntarily to accept Indian citizenship they could not be sent to India. Unless they were also included, a group of stateless people was going to be there.

Athulathmudali said he would inform him of the government's reactions the next day. He left at 9.55 p.m., after half hour.

President Jayewardene was at his private estate in Mirissa, Weligama that weekend. He returned to Colombo on Monday by helicopter. Athulathmudali met him in the forenoon at the presidential secretariat. Later Athulathmudali told the press that Sri Lanka would stand by her obligation and expected India to honour hers.

Around noon Athulathmudali rang Dixit and told him that he would like to meet him that evening. The meeting took place at his eighth-floor office in the Insurance Corporation building at Slave Island. There, Athulathmudali told Dixit that Colombo and New Delhi should issue a joint communique about the agreements reached during their discussions the previous week and with Thondaman on Saturday. Dixit wanted to consult New Delhi.

Meanwhile tension was building up. There was tension in the tea country. The LJEWU was straining every nerve to keep workers away from the prayer campaign. There was fear of a clash between the rival trade unions. Police were alerted and police stations in the hill country mounted mobile patrols.

At the third floor suite of Navaloka Hospital CWC leaders met Thondaman. They decided to launch the prayer campaign as scheduled. A brief press communique was released that the prayer meetings would be held as planned on Wednesday, Thai Pongal day.

In a bedside interview to the Island Thondaman made some caustic comments about the government. He said he felt the government was weak and approaching the matter the wrong way. "The government wants to stick to the Sirima-Shastri Pact in an obvious attempt to get SLFP support".

The Journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge pose the question whether it was the right time to launch a prayer campaign?

Thondaman: "What do you think is the best time?"

Wickrematunge: "Sri Lanka tea is facing a crisis because of threats to poison the tea."

Thondaman: "Threats from whom?"

Wickrematunge: "The Tamil Eelam Army."

Thondaman: "Then this is the ideal time for the Sri Lanka government to grant citizenship to 469,000 stateless persons and show the world its magnanimity."

When Wickrematunge commented that India should take back the 506,000 persons who had applied for Indian citizenship, Thondaman told him two governments had decided on the numbers without consulting the people concerned or their representatives.

One of the arguments urged by the press and the government against the prayer campaign was the crisis situation Lankan tea was facing following the threat of the Tamil Eelam Army, a minor Tamil militant group, to poison the Lankan tea. That created panic among buyers in the West. They cut purchases of Lankan tea. The media argued that a prayer campaign at this juncture was an insidious attempt by the CWC to hurt the economy. There were also oblique hints that the CWC was helping the Tamil insurgency by the prayer campaign.

Thondaman answered both. He said the CWC's stand on Eelam had been made clear, repeatedly. "The CWC is opposed to Eelam. There is no question of trying to help attain an ideal it opposes". He said the CWC had asked the management to adjust working hours so that its members could also do a full day's work.

The next day, January 14, was Thai Pongal day, a day of great significance to Hindus. On this day, they get up early, wash their homes, clean, bathe, wear new clothes and boil milk and rice as the first rays of the

sun pierce the dawn mist. They offer the milk rice, which they call pongal, to the Sun. Given of Energy, and they go to the temple to worship. This year, in addition to their customary routine, the estate workers had an additional duty: the lengthy morning prayers

The prayer meetings had generated great fervour among the plantation workers. Estate committees had arranged for bajana, villupattu, kathapirasangam and religious discourses. The festive spirit and the fact that Thai Pongal is a normal holiday on the estates, had created a sense of unity. Even members of rival trade unions joined in the prayers.

Thondaman took some time off from hospital and returned to his flat opposite Royal College, to be with his grand-children and great-grand-children. He never missed being with them on festive occasions. And Thai Pongal had always been a special occasion of family reunion. His only son, Ramanathan and his children, Anuradhara, Adhilakshmi, Renuka, Kothai, Savumiyamoorthy Arumuga Ramanatha, Thondaman and Thamayanathi Geetha, and their families had gathered at his flat. Thondaman wanted to return to his hospital bed by 9 a.m. but his great-grandson Senthil, clung to him and wouldn't let him go.

When he returned, at about 9.45 a.m. Dixit telephoned. After a Pongal greeting he said: "Thonda, I have a Pongal present for you." He said Sri Lanka and India had reached an agreement on the stateless issue.

Dixit explained that India would grant citizenship to the remainder of the 506,000 who had applied for Indian citizenship. Sri Lanka would absorb the balance. Sri Lanka would pass the required legislation within six weeks. That much sounded reasonable to Thondaman. But when Dixit said India would complete its commitment in six to eight weeks and Sri Lanka its part of the deal within 18 months, Thondaman exploded.

"No. I can't accept it. Please don't agree", he said.

That must have been a shock to Dixit. He had not expected such a reply. Before he could ask why Thondaman told him: "Your agreement will only help Sri Lanka to delay the whole process".

Dixit: "Both governments have agreed to release separate statements about the agreement

Thondaman: 'Please don't make any statement. Even if you agree I never will. I want Sri Lanka to declare immediately that all persons of Indian origin who had not applied for Indian citizenship shall be Lankan citizens. That will end the problem once and for all. You have now agreed to delay the whole thing by another 18 months. I can't agree to that.

Dixit said he would convey Thondaman's objections to New Delhi and the Colombo government.

Dixit acted fast. He rang Athulathmudali and told him of Thondaman's objection and that Delhi was against releasing the statements without the concurrence of Thondaman. Athulathmudali replied that he would try to persuade Thondaman to fall in line. He drove straight to Ward Place and had a brief consultation with President Jayewardene. They decided that Athulathmudali should try to persuade Thondaman to accept the arrangement.

Athulathmudali met Thondaman that evening at Navaloka Hospital. Athulathmudali relayed what Dixit had told him. He said the agreement he had worked out with Dixit met Thondaman's demands.

Thondaman replied that his objection was the 18-month duration. He said it was an attempt to delay the whole thing. He wanted the settlement to be immediate, once and for all. "You know our bureaucrats. They will give a hundred and one reasons to delay the whole thing", he argued.

"Oh! If you don't agree the whole cabinet may go against you", Athulathmudali said warningly.

"I don't care if the entire cabinet turns against me. If that is so, let it come. I am prepared to meet it", Thondaman replied with some heat.

Athulathmudali changed his tone and began to plead. He said he got India's agreement with great difficulty. President Jayewardene felt India's agreement was essential to sell the whole thing to the Buddhist clergy

and the Sinhala people. Thondaman said he would consult the working committee and convey their reaction later in the day.

Two days later, Thondaman told the Hindu newspaper's Associate Editor, N. Ram, that he had agreed to the 18-month implementation period because India had accepted it. "India as usual," he said with a guffaw, "has let me down by agreeing to this proposal of 18 months".

Thondaman was nursing a suspicion that India had sacrificed the people of Indian origin to the larger interests of its foreign policy. Indira had perceived in S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and his wife, Sirima Bandaranaike, a close identity of views and there developed an intimate personal friendship. This resulted in concessions to Sri Lanka at the expense of the Indian Tamil community in Sri Lanka. The citizenship agreements of 1964 and 1974 clearly showed India's anxiety to accommodate Sri Lanka to the maximum. Dixit too had tried to accommodate Sri Lanka by agreeing to the 18-month proposal.

That evening Thondaman signified his acceptance. He told Ram the reasons: "I decided to agree in a spirit of accommodation, mainly because India had agreed. They agreed and I had to agree because the Indian government had given in. Left to myself, I would have insisted and I would have been successful in getting the citizenship rights immediately without an 18 month delay.....but maybe with a little difficulty".

The agreement was announced by India and Sri Lanka the next day, Wednesday, second day of the prayer campaign. The nine-para Colombo statement, after detailing the numbers to be granted citizenship by Sri Lanka and India, stated in the eighth para: "The Indian government has given an undertaking that they will grant citizenship to all the 506,000 persons who have applied. It is only on the guarantee that this full complement of those who have applied for Indian citizenship are getting it that we now propose to proceed to take on an additional 94,000. In fact, the ratio 4:7 will be observed until the entire 506,000 who have applied for Indian citizenship have been granted Indian citizenship. The Indian High Commission has already granted Indian citizenship to 421,207 persons and expects to complete the granting of citizenship to the balance 84,793, to make a total of 506,000 within six to eight months of Sri Lanka enacting

legislation to confer Sri Lanka citizenship on the additional number".

The last para committed Sri Lanka to the granting of Sri Lanka citizenship and the issuing of certificates of citizenship within 18 months and to the enacting of the necessary legislation in February 1986.

The seven-para statement from the Indian High Commission committed India to conferring Indian citizenship to the 506,000 who applied before applications were closed on October 30, 1981, within six to eight months of Sri Lanka enacting laws to confer citizenship on the residual numbers of the stateless Tamils of Indian origin. The statement also tied fulfilment of the Indian commitment to Sri Lanka carrying out its own obligations.

The CWC planning committee met in emergency session at Thondaman's suite in Nawaloka Hospital on Wednesday, Patti Pongal day, and decided to call off the prayer campaign. Instructions were immediately sent to the estate committees that workers should report for duty on Thursday morning. Plucking started in most of the tea estates on Thursday, but estates in the outlying areas resumed work on Friday.

On Wednesday, Athuathmudali told pressmen: "I think this is a final settlement. To all intents and purposes, statelessness will be over". When asked what prompted the government to work out this arrangement, he replied. "The government has wanted to settle this problem for a long time. The government's decision is not due to the prayer campaign".

Thondaman also met pressmen at the hospital that evening. To the same question he answered: "The pressure brought upon the government by the prayer campaign resulted in the government's statement".

Told of Athulathmudali's statement that the campaign had not influenced the government, he quipped: "Mr. Athulathmudali is a lawyer. I am not. The fact whether the CWC pressure was answered or this happened on the magnanimity of a circumstantial situation. I leave it to the people to decide".

Thondaman saw two new welcome features in this episode. The first and the most important was the direct

involvement of the CWC in the negotiating process. The second: India had brought the CWC to the fore and had played a supportive role.

The Sinhala extremists could not digest this development. The Mahanayake of the Asgiriya Chapter, the Ven. Palipana Chandananda Thera, with over 9,000 bhikkhus, objected to the granting of citizenship and called for referendum.

The SLFP and MEP also mounted a campaign. They reverted to their twin theme, that Thondaman was dictating to the Jayewardene government and that the future of the Sinhalese in general and the Kandyans in particular was in danger.

The SLFP leader, Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike, in a lengthy press statement on January 20, said her party was perturbed by the January 15 government communique and added: "True, it is seen that the government has succumbed to the pressure and duress exercised by the CWC for their own benefit, at a time when the country itself is beset with serious problems of existence and identity".

The statement argued that the agreement would strengthen Thondaman's power base and give him sufficient strength to dictate terms to future governments.

At a political rally in Pelmadulla that same day, she declared: "When 94,000 plantation workers receive their citizenship rights, over four lakhs of estate workers will also get voting rights. Today we are being attacked from the north. If we are attacked in the hill country in addition, the Sinhalese will have no alternative but to jump into the sea. Therefore the question of granting voting rights to 94,000 estate workers should be put before the people".

Further, she said, Thondaman had become more powerful than the President of Sri Lanka. The people of the hill country would have to get ready for war with the estate workers.

The Sun, which could not stomach Thondaman's achievement, started ridiculing him. In the Weekend of January 19, 'By Momus' in his column wrote: "His Excel-

lency Rt. Hon. Thondaman (Thonda to you and me) must definitely qualify for Time magazine's Man of the Year award. Even as the Ayatollah did at the height of the American hostage crisis, Thondaman held Sri Lanka hostage with his prayer campaign."

It went on to say: "He is the champion of the underdog, a potential Nobel Peace Prize winner, who will go down on his knees and beat his breast and say his prayers for the rights of the have-nots".

Sensing the mounting opposition, the government decided to rush through with the legislation. The bill titled "An Act to provide for the granting of the status of Sri Lanka citizenship to certain stateless persons of Indian origin," was sent to the Supreme Court as a matter of urgent national interest. The Supreme Court ruled that it was in conformity with the constitution.

The bill was moved by Prime Minister Premadasa and debated and passed by parliament on January 31. The SLFP and the MEP opposed it. The government was supported by the lone Communist Party member Sarath Muttetuwegama.

The second clause of the eight-clause law said Sri Lanka would complete the granting of citizenship to the 375,000 persons it had agreed to take under the two agreements with India. The third clause said Sri Lanka would take the 94,000 who did not apply for Indian citizenship. This third clause said India had agreed to take the balance 84,973 of the 506,000 who had opted for Indian citizenship.

Clause 5 brought in a new factor which had never cropped up during the negotiations with India. It said Sri Lanka would grant citizenship to one person after India adopted one citizen. Then, after India completed its quota of 84,793, Sri Lanka would grant citizenship to the balance 9,207 persons.

When this provision was drawn to the attention of Thondaman, he retorted: "Someone is trying to be too clever and smart. Lankan politicians and officials never learn from experience. If they had granted citizenship to their quota of 375,000 they could have forced India to take back the balance. They dragged their feet, brought

in the 4:7 ratio—and these people are here, in Sri Lanka. They never realise that the people are physically here, and that India loses nothing by dragging on the process. Actually, India has gained by Sri Lanka's 'cleverness', he laughed.

The same story was repeated again. All efforts of Thondaman and the CWC to speed up the registration process were frustrated. This fuelled youth frustration among the usually submissive plantation Tamils. It also necessitated, two years later, the enactment of a special law to declare all stateless persons citizens.

CHAPTER 11

THE WORM TURNS

Eleven days after calling off the prayer campaign, violence erupted in the hill country. It started as a minor incident at the annual **Thai Poosam** festival, at Talawakelle Kathiresan temple. The brightly lit **ratham** had just passed the main street on that eventual January 26, (Sunday) night, when some thugs set upon a few plantation workers walking towards the chariot.

The workers were assaulted police, records said and described the incident as a personal dispute over a twelve rupee debt. The CWC officials said that was only a pretext; that tension had been building up between plantation Tamils in the neighbouring estates and Sinhalese shop-keepers in town for quite some years. Some traders were indulging in persistent anti-Tamil propaganda. Teasing and Tamil-baiting had increased after the 1983 riots and serious clashes were only averted by CWC intervention.

In 1984, some Sinhala traders had objected to Hindus having a chariot procession along the town roads on **Thai Poosam** day. Police banned it saying the procession would inflame buddhist feelings and result in a breach of peace. In 1985 too, a similar ban was attempted, but CWC representations at top police level thwarted it. Police permission was given for the festival.

There were no incidents during the festival, but afterwards estate Tamils found alone or in lonely spots were assaulted by thugs. An inquiry was held into one such incident and several police officers attached to the Talawakelle police station were transferred.

Police permitted the 1986 festival too. There were no incidents during the day, but at night as the chariot went down the main street, thugs set upon a few estate workers. They also attacked the CWC office-bearers and some Tamil shops. They torched other Tamil shops that night and some Tamils had to be wardened in hospital.

The next day, January 27, the hill country Tamils who had been at the receiving end since 1977, retaliated. They gathered in large groups and pounced on the Sinhala-dominated towns and Sinhala villages. They blocked the steep estate roads with felled trees and massive boulders. They took up positions on hillocks overhanging hairpin bends to block lorry-loads of armed Sinhala thugs entering their estates. They also attacked, burnt, pillaged.

There was panic all round. Police called for reinforcements. They called in the military. But nothing could stop the attack. The estate superintendents and their staff, mainly Sinhalese, fled. The Sinhala traders, mainly from the south, fled too. The indigenous Kandyan Sinhalese who had no place to go, sought shelter in Buddhist temples, churches and schools. The Tamils in the towns sought refuge in the Hindu kovils.

Police declared a full-day curfew on January 29. But the violence continued. The estate workers kept up the pressure, thwarting all attempts by the Sinhala thugs to reorganise themselves. Police lifted the curfew for four hours on January 30, morning, to enable the people to buy their provisions. But the shops did not open as most of the traders had fled to their traditional villages in the south.

The situation was still tense especially in the Nuwara Eliya district. There were also signs that the violence was spreading to other parts of the tea country. The government was alarmed. The security council met on January 30 to take stock of the situation. They decided to alert the army. A red alert was sounded to police and security forces.

A delegation from the two plantation corporations and the general secretary of the CWC went to meet President Jayewardene on January 30 and brief him on the situation.

President Jayewardene told JEDB chairman, Pemsit Seneviratne, SPC chairman Ranjan Wijeratne and CWC general secretary M. S. Sellasamy that he was not interested in finding out who started it all. "Post mortems can be held later. I want this thing to stop".

There was a difference of opinion on how the situation should be handled. The two corporation bosses preferred induction of the army. Sellasamy warned against that move. "That will only worsen the situation. We'll control our people. You control yours"

"When is Thonda coming?" President Jayewardene asked anxiously.

"This evening, sir", Sellasamy replied.

Thodaman was in India when the Talawakelle clash occurred. He went to his ancestral village, Muna Pudur, on January 20, soon after he was discharged from the Navaloka Hospital. He had planned to return on January 30, to take part in the parliamentary debate on the special law to grant citizenship to stateless persons.

Back in Sri Lanka, Thondaman soon took action to defuse tension in the hill country. He instructed CWC officials to pacify the workers. He telephoned the Inspector-General of Police, urging him to instruct police to act impartially. He warned that if police tried to harass estate Tamils it would inflame them further and render the situation dangerous.

The next day, January 31, tension began to ebb. Police relaxed the curfew to 7 p.m.—6 a.m. Thondaman was busy with the debate on the special law. Police reports say the day passed free of incident:

The next day, February 1, was a Saturday. Thondaman issued a press statement delineating the course of events that culminated in the violence. He blamed the extremist Sinhala elements in Talawakelle for the provocation. He also blamed Opposition Leader Anura Bandaranaike for inflaming the extremists by his speech in parliament on December 20.

On that day Bandaranaike commented extensively on the CWC's December 3, declaration (see chapter on prayer campaign) and on certain police arrests of estate workers.

He first mentioned the arrest of three or four Indian Tamil workers and then the arrest of an estate worker at Talawakelle town in August or September 1985. He went on:—"about 3,000 to 5,000 estate workers came and

sat down at the police station, demanding that the OIC should come out of the police station and not only that he release the suspect, but also apologise, which he did—which the man who was scared to death did.

"They came with clubs, they came with mammothies and with rocks and insisted that the OIC should apologise. The OIC, who was shivering, came out of the police station and apologised—for making a lawful, legal arrest. I am asking you, what is the government there for if people can intimidate just by sheer numbers, a legal, lawful arrest of a man who was doing something wrong in the town? You just have 5,000 people surrounding a police station with rifles. Are you endorsing that Hon. Minister?"

Thondaman: What do you mean?

Bandaranaike: Are you endorsing that.

Thondaman: If you have got the facts correct you will not ask me.

Bandaranaike: I am a hundred per cent sure of the facts. I went to the police station.

Thondaman: I know the facts very well. I know how this man was stripped and taken naked on the road. Then the people were enraged..

Bandaranaike: That is not correct.

Thondaman: What?. Not correct?. I know every word of it.

Bandaranaike: What was told you was not correct.

Thondaman: I know. I have verified every little word. You ask the ASP.

Bandaranaike: The man went with all his clothes.

Thondaman: No.

Bandaranaike: Yes. He was fully clothed.

Thondaman: No. He was stripped on the road.

Bandaranaike: That is not the version I have heard and not only from the people.

Thondaman: You never get the correct version.

Later in the exchange, Thondaman referred to the 1984 police ban of the Talawakene Kathiresan Kovil Thai Poosam festival procession. He said the people who banned the religious procession were the very people who gave Bandaranaike information of the arrest of the estate worker.

On Sunday, February 2, a delegation of the Ceylon Planters' Society had a meeting with President Jayewardene SPC chairman Wijeratne and JEDB chairman Senewiratne were associated with the President. The society's president, M. Delwatte, said most of the planters had left their estates fearing attack and charged the CWC with the breakdown in discipline, law and order on the plantations.

Wijeratne intervened. He told the planters to come down from their pedestals and learn to adapt themselves to the new situation. Delwatte retorted: "Gone are the days when planters lived on pedestals".

Many of the planters said Thondaman and his CWC were behind the riots. They suggested stern action by police and the services. The planters spoke very harshly of the CWC. President Jayewardene brushed all such complaints aside. He told the delegation he had implicit trust in Thondaman.

The planters insisted that the district level leaders of the CWC were active during the riots and maintained they had ample evidence to support their charge. President Jayewardene then summoned Defence Secretary Sepala Attiygalle to ascertain whether that was true. Attiygalle said police information was that CWC had promoted the attacks on the Sinhalese.

Planters told the President that they would not be able to return to the estates if the army was not deployed there. More and more Sinhalese were leaving the settlements and villages in Talawakelle, Agrapatana, Hatton, Watagoda and the surrounding areas. The schools and temples were full of Sinhala refugees and more were pouring in, they said.

The delegation harped on the charge that the northern Tamil militant organisations, EROS and PLOT had infiltrated the CWC and Thondaman's influence among the Tamil estate workers was considerably eroded. President Jayewardene listened attentively to these accusations and told the delegation that everything possible would be done to restore law and order in the thoddams.

While the Ceylon Planters' Society was meeting the President, another important meeting took place at Thondaman's flat opposite Royal College. President Jayewardene's only son and his security adviser, Ravi and Joint Operations Command chief Lt. Gen. Cyril Ranaatunge were seated in the tastefully furnished sitting room. They had been sent by President Jayewardene to discuss the situation on the estates and devise remedial measures.

Thondaman blamed Sinhala extremists and some section of the police for the situation. He dismissed the charge that the northern militant groups had infiltrated the CWC. "There are some misguided elements in every country, in every society and every race and religion. If you harass a community or race just because there are a few extremists among them, you are only creating a climate favourable to those elements. That's the lesson of history", he told the two emissaries.

The military path the government had followed in the north and east had been counter-productive, he said and he advised the two government advisors not to repeat the same mistake.

Thondaman argued that the plantation Tamils were loyal to him. He would get them to stop their attacks and the government should make the Sinhalese keep the peace. "I ask the government to strengthen my hand. That will help me wield greater influence among the estate Tamils. If you strengthen my hand I shall be able to strengthen the President's".

He explained the fate of labour leaders like Dr. N. M. Perera. "They had golden brains. They knew a lot about labour movements of the world, their history and many matters of that type. But they never realised the basic human reaction. If you fail to look after labour when you are in power then you lose the very base on

which you stand. That's what happened to the LSSP and the Communist Party. N. M. and Pieter broke strikes when in power and now see what had happened to them. They won't be able to rebuild for a long time. I don't want to make the same mistake. I want you to appreciate this. That will help you to understand my position and the course of action I follow. Remember, if I lose credibility among my people the government too, will be the loser. Don't forget the fate that befell the United Front government. The LSSP and CP lost their base and finally the government itself collapsed".

The two men left after giving Thondaman the assurance that the army would not be deployed on the estates.

But on that day the violence showed signs of spreading. At Ginigathena, a predominantly Sinhala area Indian Tamils who went shopping in the town were attacked. In the Nuwara Eliya district too, sporadic incidents were cropping up despite the night curfew. There were reports of large numbers of Indian Tamils marching towards the Sinhala settlements — settlements which the estate Tamils considered a form of Sinhala colonisation by which they were being encircled.

Rumours raced through the country like wild fire. There was panic in the entire hill country. And politicians stoked it with wild claims that EROS and PLOT had large caches of arms hidden among the tea bushes.

The next day, Monday, Thondaman and Sellasamy met President Jayewardene at Janadhipathi Mandiraya. Athulathmudali, Ravi Jayewardene, Attygale and Ranaatunge were present. Thondaman urged the President to restore law and order. He told him police were taking sides and if that was allowed to continue, the situation would rapidly deteriorate.

Tension continued on Tuesday, but fewer incidents were reported. The government started distributing dry rations to the refugees whose numbers were still swelling. The exodus of Sinhalese from the Nuwara Eliya district continued unabated, though police and the services assured them protection. Most of those who fled were traders from the south who had migrated to the tea country within the last five decades, much later than the Indian Tamils.

Thondaman attended Wednesday's (February 5) cabinet meeting as usual, at 8 a.m. As he entered the cabinet room upstairs in the old senate building he noticed a change in the atmosphere. The usual friendly greetings were absent. Some ministers looked the other way. Thondaman took his seat next to Minister Ananda-tissa de Alwis.

The Talawakella clash and the fallout were discussed. Minister Dissanayake was agitated and angry. He said the Sinhalese had become refugees in their homeland. Thondaman retorted: "For the Indian Tamils too, this is their homeland. They too have been made refugees in their homeland".

President Jayewardene intervened. He said the urgent need of the hour was restoration of peace, law and order. They should decide on the ways and means of achieving it.

Thondaman offered to visit the troubled areas and appeal to the estate workers. He suggested that Sinhalese leaders could do the same in Sinhala areas. The President accepted this suggestion and ordered that helicopters be made available for Thondaman and Sella-samy to visit the estates. Seneviratne, Wijeratne and the police chief could accompany the CWC leaders.

On Thursday morning, two army helicopters painted in camouflage, took off from the Air Force Sports ground at Sir Chittampalam Gardiner Mawatha in Colombo Fort, around 8 a.m. Sellasamy, V. S. Annamalai and A. Rajan accompanied Thondaman. JEDB boss Seneviratne the IGP and other service chiefs were also in the group.

Their first stop was Talawakelle, the spot where the trouble broke out. Thondaman went with others to the nearby school ground where over 3000 workers had assembled. He was the only speaker and his speech was business-like. He said he was sad about the incidents and the immense troubles the workers had undergone. He said he was elated at the manner they had withstood the onslaught. "I am proud that you did not run away as you did in the past. I am also proud that you fought the thugs who had assaulted you and subjected you to innumerable indignities in the recent past".

He told them that they did not pick the fight themselves, but it was thrust on them and they had risen valiantly to the challenge. "You must remember that your fight is against the small clique of Sinhala extremists who think they can assault the Tamils whenever they want. Your fight is not against the Sinhala tea plucker or Sinhala worker or peasant who, like you is also struggling to make a decent living".

He then told them of the undertaking he had given the President at the previous day's cabinet meeting, of the attempts of some extremists to bring out the army to hunt the Tamils down; and that he had told the President such measures were not necessary. He would get the estate workers to maintain peace.

"I am now going to ask you a question. All those who say 'yes' should shout their approval to enable the JEDB chairman, IGP and other officials present to hear — and raise your hands. Then I will ask all those who disagree to voice their disapproval and put up their hands. Now my question: I gave an undertaking to President Jayewardene at yesterday's cabinet meeting that I would persuade the estate workers to maintain peace. Will you honour my undertaking?"

The workers shouted in unison: We will honour your undertaking.

Thondaman: Those opposed please say so.

Not a single dissenting voice.

Thondaman: Shall I tell the IGP and other government officials present here that you will not indulge in any acts of violence hereafter?

The crowd shouted back: You are our leader. We obey you in whatever you tell us.

Thondaman: Thank you for this commitment.

The crowd chorused: Long live Thondaman. Long live our leader.

Thondaman went on: "JEDB chairman Seneviratne is here. He tells me that some of the estate staff fled

the estates through fear. They are in the refugee camps. I want the estate committee leaders to go to the camps and bring them back. I am going to make the estate committee responsible for the safety of the staff".

He addressed two more meetings that day, at Bogawantalawa and Norwood, and visited the refugee camps in both places. He met the Tamil refugees who described how their line rooms were torched and they were assaulted by Sinhala thugs. He also visited two Sinhala refugee camps, disregarding police advice. He sensed an atmosphere of hostility, though some of the estate staff talked to him and related how massive crowds of estate workers had swept through the areas in unending waves. They also told him how the Tamil crowds attacked shops and new Sinhala settlements.

A bevy of reporters and photographers awaited the return of Thondaman and his group at the air force grounds that evening. They had gathered there by 4.30 p.m. but the air force control room told them that departure from Nuwara Eiliya had been delayed by about one and a half hours. The two American Bell choppers landed around 6.15 p.m. as the sun took its final dip into a choppy Indian ocean.

Thondaman agreed to meet pressmen at the pavilion "Why should we stand here and talk? We'll go to the pavilion and talk there. over a fruit drink" he suggested.

Thondaman has always been a favourite of pressmen. He is considerate. He treats them well. He provides them with good copy.

His co-ordinating secretary Thirunavukkarasu hurriedly arranged a press conference, fruit drinks, short eats and all

Thondaman made three important announcements: First, estate Tamils would refrain from violence, except in self defence. There was no need to deploy the army and he would convey that to President Jayewardene whom he would be meeting immediately. Secondly, peace had already returned to most places except at Ginigathena and Hatton. Thirdly, the CWC would gift the rehabilitation ministry one million rupees for reha-

bilitation of refugees — half to be spent on the Sinhala refugees and the other half on the Tamils.

He said according to CWC statistics there were more Tamil than Sinhalese refugees. There were 300 Sinhala families in the refugees camps at Bogawantalawa, another 300 in Hatton and an additional 250 in Talawakelle. There were 1,500 Tamil families in the refugee camps at Hatton and another 250 at Talawakelle.

That night, Thondaman gave an interview to Kendall Hopman, then of the Sun. He said: "Unlike previous occasions, the Tamils this time were forewarned and were guided by the saying that 'attack is the best form of defence'. Elements opposed to the CWC had vowed to teach the CWC a lesson if they launched the prayer campaign. They had taken the Tamils for granted. This time the Tamils did not run. The worm has turned. Violence is not the monopoly of anybody. Whoever attacks first has the advantage. The Tamil people were prepared for the attack".

Next day, February 7, the Sun led with that story under the headline: "CWC leader Thondaman says, Attack is best form of defence — violence not the monopoly of anybody". That story created a furore, outside parliament and within.

It was not a slip, as some tried to explain. Thondaman has never made a slip at press conferences. He says what he wants to say and after careful thought. This too, was said after careful thought. And he selected the paper. He knew the Sun's angle. It had been most critical of the prayer campaign. He knew it would play this up, so he used it to convey his message.

Thondaman had been striving since the 1981 riots for this change of situation. It had angered him at the Badulla convention when delegate after delegate lamented that they were being attacked and humiliated since the riots. "We have lost everything. We want to go back to India was their refrain. Thondaman had got so angry that he shouted: "Do you call yourselves males? Are you not ashamed to say that you are being assaulted? What were your hands doing? If they give you slaps can't you give back at least one? Why don't you organise yourselves and learn to defend yourselves?"

Since then at every meeting, he had tried to infuse self-confidence and a sense of pride in the estate Tamils. He told them they had been attacked in 1977 and again in 1981 for no reason at all. He repeatedly reminded estate workers of the Tamil proverb: "If you bend your head everyone will give it a knock — and asked them to learn not to bend it. He told them they could not defend themselves individually. They should organise themselves into groups to be able to meet any situation.

The 1983 holocaust taught the Indian Tamils the need for organised self-defence. Moreover, a new generation had captured power in the estate committees, a generation with no knowledge or affection for the Tamil Nadu villages from which their ancestors had come. They had never been out of Sri Lanka, thanks to the denial of travel facilities to non-citizens. Sri Lanka was their motherland and where they wanted to live and die. And to live in Sri Lanka they had to defend themselves from Sinhala thugs.

The armed struggle waged by their northern brothers had also helped in this psychological transformation. They were proud of the heroic deeds of the northern 'boys'. They marvelled at the northern militants. This change was evident at the Colombo convention of January 1985. Delegate after delegate told Thondaman of their determination to end the indignities the Indian Tamil community had suffered since birth. "Give us the command. We will fight".

Thondaman knew of this change among the Tamils. He was aware too that even moderate Sinhala leaders was ignorant of it. He used the Sun interview to serve notice.

In another press interview Thondaman said interested parties were trying to incite the estate workers. Asked to identify the parties, he said: "They are the people who are jealous of the CWC and also those who are bent on creating the impression that the CWC has little or no control in the plantation areas. The motive is to convince the government that the CWC cannot use its clout to keep the situation in check; and to press the government to move troops into the hill country and thereby create a situation similar to that in the north".

He discounted the theory that EROS and PLOT were responsible for the incidents

The next day, Friday, February 7, Thondaman helicoptered to Nuwara Eliya for the second time. SPC chairman Wijeratne went with him. They addressed three meetings and visited refugee camps. At these meetings also, Thondaman got the workers' assurance that they would keep the peace. Back in Colombo, Wijeratne told the press that some estates had already resumed work and all estates would be working on Monday. February 10.

On the same Friday, another group helicoptered to Nuwara Eliya. Minister Dissanayake and Opposition Leader Anura Bandaranaike headed that band. They had a hostile reception at the refugee camps. The refugees complained that the government had let them down. They were angry that the MPs had waited so long to visit them. Dissanayake, Bandaranaike and Thondaman represented Nuwara Eliya, a three-member seat.

At Talawakelle, Minister Dissanayake was shown a black painted zinc sheet bearing the words 'Ma'ai Pu/i' in Tamil. It meant 'Hill Tigers'. This incensed Dissanayake. He showed it to Raju, assistant secretary of the CWC and asked him how that board came to be displayed in front of the CWC branch office at Talawakelle.

Raju said he was not aware of any such board and remarked that it could have been written by anyone, including those who showed it to the minister.

A local politician, Raja Seneviratne, went to the funeral of a labourer killed during the incidents and was unceremoniously asked to go back to where he came from. The Sinhala refugees also threatened to damage the helicopter in which he arrived.

On February 11 the situation in the hill country was almost back to normal. Shops were open in the bazaar. but the bus service was still slack. It took at least two weeks more, for life in the hill country to become quite normal — and on that day Thondaman handed over a million-rupee cheque to the rehabilitation ministry for the Sinhala and Tamil refugees.

The Talawakelle incidents were raised in parliament on three days — February 21, March 6 and 7. Opposition

Leader Bandaranaike raised it on February 21. He asked: "What have the Sinhala people who are in the refugee camps done to hurt the feelings of the Tamil estate workers?"

Thondaman: I blame you all for the incidents.

Bandaranaike. Your man, Chandrasekaran, is responsible for the happenings in Talawakelle.

Thondaman: He is a responsible man.

Bandaranaike: If there is a responsible government, you would have him arrested for what he has been saying.

At the end of this exchange Bandaranaike walked out in a show of SLFP opposition to the government's handling of the Talawakelle incidents. As he walked out, he shouted: "Attack it the best form of defence".

Thondaman: What I said had been misinterpreted by you and some others.

Bandaranaike: Who are the others?

Thondaman: Why, the Sun newspaper. You must realise that the estate labourers will not tolerate injustice.

The parliament debated an opposition-sponsored adjournment motion on March 6 and 7. Ananda Dassanayake, who opened the debate for the opposition, charged that the CWC was behind the violence. He quoted Thondaman's comment to the Sun that the 'worm had turned' and said the Indian Tamils had chased out the Sinhalese, especially the shop-owners. Dassanayake also taunted Thondaman with buying property in India and supporting the Tigers.

Dassanayake: You have bought property in India.

Thondaman: You can only make such allegations.

Dassanayake: The minister supported the Tigers. Will the minister come to oust them?

Thondaman: I will go with the member to oust the Tigers if he is ready to come with me.

Mahaweli Minister Gamini Dissanayake charged that some of the CWC district leaders were responsible for the violence. He said northern Tamil militant organisations had infiltrated the plantations.

Opposition Leader Anura Bandaranaike also accused the CWC of organising the violence and blamed the government for not taking proper action.

Bandaranaike said: Everybody is living in fear in the estate areas. What is the government doing about it?

Thondaman: Let's go and assure them security.

Bandaranaike: When this trouble started the minister was in India.

Thondaman: When I came back it had stopped.

Bandaranaike: That's why I say your supporters are responsible for it.

Thondaman: I appealed to them and they obeyed.

In his speech, Thondaman explained the course of events that led to the eruption of violence. He said everyone should learn a lesson from the incidents that no community could be kept in subjugation for long. No people could be kept down by threats of violence. He had all along urged the advisability of integrating all communities into a Lankan society. He had consistently opposed the policy of assimilating Indian Tamils into the Sinhala community. He said he had fought for the right of the Indian Tamils to retain their separate identity, culture, religion, language. That had been his policy throughout, he said.

"I do not change my policy as some of you do. My policy is the same. I do not just play to the gallery. I am against assimilation. I am for integration. I live in the midst of these people not in India or in Colombo", he told parliament.

In the next three years and by the first half of the year 1989, Thondaman succeeded in strengthening the distinctive character of his Indian community.

CHAPTER 12

ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE VISION

November 9, 1988 was a day of triumph for Thondaman. It was on that day that the final act of the long drawn out drama of statelessness was enacted. Parliament unanimously passed the simple seven-clause bill entitled "Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons (Special Provisions) Act", which conferred Lankan citizenship on every stateless person of Indian origin lawfully resident in Sri Lanka who had not applied for Indian citizenship under the Sirima-Shastri pact. The law also allowed the granting of Certificate of Citizenship if applied for in the prescribed forms, supported by an affidavit.

That was the last major act of the eighth parliament whose dissolution was delayed to rush this legislation through — legislation brought in to satisfy Thondaman and the CWC, unhappy that the granting of citizenship had not been completed within the 18-month time frame of the January 1986 agreement.

Nearly three years after the agreement, citizenship had been granted only to 233,000 persons of the total 469,000. This despite the constant pressure Thondaman brought to bear on the bureaucracy and the special effort made by the administration.

The Commissioner for the Registration of Persons of Indian Origin reorganised the department and recruited more personnel. He revamped administrative and interviewing procedures. Applications were reorganised on a district and estate basis. The assistant commissioners went to estates to conduct investigations on the spot.

Thondaman accompanied them and made use of the CWC machinery to get the applicants to face the inquiry. But there were many difficulties. Biggest of them all was the problem of tracing the applicants for these applications had been made over a quarter of a century ago and some of the applicants had died and others had switched

estates or migrated to other parts of the country, like Vavuniya. In one instance, in one estate in Kalutara, the whereabouts of over 100 families could not be traced.

Thondaman and the CWC were concerned that with the slow pace of registration it might take another quarter-century to complete the granting of citizenship. On March 30, 1987, CWC Assistant Secretary, A. M. D. Rajan told a public meeting that if the government failed to grant citizenship within the stipulated 18 months the CWC might have to resume its prayer campaign.

The CWC decided on a three-day prayer campaign starting on June 1. Thondaman met President Jayewardene on May 27 and told him that the granting of citizenship had not been completed and impressed on him the urgency of settling the problem. They also discussed the arrests of up-country Tamil youths on the pretext that they were engaged in terrorist activities. President Jayewardene appointed a cabinet sub-committee, headed by Athulathmudali, to quicken the citizenship process. Thondaman and Hameed were the other members. Thondaman agreed to call off the prayer campaign and meet President Jayewardene on June 1 to sort out other outstanding problems.

Thondaman was questioned closely by the press about this.

Question: You say that if the prayer campaign was not called the authorities would not take any steps to finalise the citizenship problem?

Answer: Yes.

Question: You are always selfish, aren't you?

Answer: Selfishness comes into the picture if you are selfish as an individual. I am not selfish myself. I am acting on behalf of the community.

Things moved little faster after the appointment of the cabinet sub-committee, but not sufficiently to complete the work soon. Officials blamed the Indian Tamils for not co-operating. Thondaman lost hope of citizenship being granted within reasonable time, so he pressed President Jayewardene to enact a special law granting citizenship to all stateless persons. President Jayewar-

dene however wavered, hesitated; yet Thondaman did not lose faith. He bided his time.

The opportunity came in September 1988, just after President Jayewardene had called for the presidential election. Opposition Leader Anura Bandaranaike addressed an SLFP seminar at the Hatton-Dickoya town hall. Anura called upon the CWC join the SLFP; the SLFP he declared was not a communal organisation and believed in granting citizenship rights to the stateless Tamils after granting the rights of the majority community. He publicly invited the CWC for talks.

Thondaman was in India at that time. Sellasamy informed him of Anura's invitation on the phone. Thondaman instructed Sellasamy to explore the matter. A meeting was arranged between Sellasamy and Mrs. Bandaranaike at which she confirmed Anura's offer and said the SLFP would restore the rights of the stateless.

When Thondaman arrived for the Wednesday cabinet meeting, the cabinet secretary showed him the Communist Party paper *Attha* which had a report on the Mrs. Bandaranaike-Sellasamy meeting. At the cabinet meeting Thondaman raised the citizenship issue and declared: "I have tried all these years to find a solution to the stateless problem. I have failed. Now, I have no moral right to continue to be the leader of the plantation Tamils. I am thinking of retiring and handing over to more able youngsters".

Premadasa understood the message. He said if Mrs. Bandaranaike could settle the citizenship problem "why can't we?" President Jayewardene also appeared willing.

After the meeting, Premadasa went up to Thondaman: "Thonda! The old man is in a mood to agree". He took Thondaman to President Jayewardene and played the trump card: "If Anura can do it, why can't we".

When they left the President's office Premadasa told Thondaman to submit a draft bill. "Give it to Choksy", he said

Thondaman acted fast. He summoned a group of lawyers and asked them to prepare the draft. The next day he handed it to K. N. Choksy, the President Counsel. Choksy consulted the Deputy Solicitor-General and want-

ted many changes introduced. Thondaman refused. He told him: "This is a political Bill, to achieve a political purpose. I want it to be enacted as it is". Choksy was hesitant. But Thondaman was firm: "If the government is not going to accept the draft I can't support the government. Please allow politicians to decide these things".

The matter dragged on for a few days. Thondaman asked Premadasa what was happening. Premadasa took Thondaman to President Jayewardene. Thondaman showed him the draft and asked that it be enacted before the dissolution of parliament. "Please do something", Premadasa urged the President. He agreed.

The Rural Industrial Development Ministry issued a press release that the government would shortly introduce legislation to confer citizenship status on stateless persons. It said the proposed law ruled that notwithstanding any other law, every person of Indian origin lawfully resident in Sri Lanka or neither a citizen of Sri Lanka nor an applicant for Indian citizenship, would be granted citizenship of Sri Lanka.

On November 9, 1988 Minister Lalith Athulathmudali presented the special legislation in parliament. It was passed unanimously. From the opposition only the Communist Party MP Dew Gunesekara, voted for the Bill. The SLFP and the MEP had walked out of the House on some other pretext, thus evading a definite stand. This legislation, taken together with the Registration of Electors (Amendment Bill) passed on April 28, 1989 removed the 40-year-old indignity that had been forced on the Indian Tamil community.

"The struggle is not over yet", said Thondaman in an interview he granted the writer on August 24, 1989, a few days before this book was handed over to the printer. "We have to get the laws implemented; we must have the people registered as citizens. That is a big task." The CWC has been assigned to handle it.

Two minor problems remain, the problem of the 84,000 Indian Tamils who got Indian passports but are still in Sri Lanka. Thondaman has been negotiating with Sri Lanka and India to resolve their situation. He has suggested that both countries consider the "ground realities" in devising a feasible solution.

In India now there are over 80,000 Lankan Tamils who fled there as refugees and want to settle down there. Under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord they have to be repatriated. Thondaman has suggested that India should absorb these refugees and Sri Lanka an equal number of Indian passport-holders who prefer to remain in Sri Lanka.

"Let's approach this as a humanitarian problem. Let's not upset these people. Let's allow the people who want to settle in India to do so. Let's allow those who want to continue to live here to do so. Any small difference resulting from this arrangement can then be settled", Thondaman says.

There is also the problem of Temporary Residence Permit (TRP) holders. Under the Nehru-Kotelawala agreement, those who opted for Indian citizenship were permitted to stay in Sri Lanka on TRP until they reached the age of 55. A few such are left and Thondaman has been negotiating with Sri Lanka government about their future.

But Thondaman was far from happy about the way things were moving with regard to the ethnic problem. The Thimpu talks in mid-1985 had failed and the TULF took over three months to present alternative proposals to those agreed on at New Delhi between Indian and Lankan officials. Sri Lanka immediately rejected the TULF proposals as going far beyond the New Delhi agreement and argued that in fact they were a revival of the Eelam demand.

At the beginning of 1986, when Thondaman was busy with the prayer campaign and later with the Talawakelle incidents, there was a lull in ethnic negotiations. The Colombo government was paying more attention to military operations. Thondaman felt he should get the negotiating process restarted. On April 17, 1986, in a press statement, he urged Rajiv Gandhi to revive negotiations.

"There are two proposals on the table. The government of India should study both and indicate to Sri Lanka the gaps to be filled and areas that should be improved". He also urged the TULF and President Jayewardene to adopt an attitude of give and take. This reactivated the negotiating process. Dixit then took over

and consulted Thondaman on May 18, 1986 for a formula on law and order, the thorny problem.

On June 25, 1986, President Jayewardene reconvened the All Party Conference, to win approval for the Lankan proposal. The TULF decided to boycott it. It wrote to Thondaman, asking the CWC not to boycott. Thondaman rejected that plea. He said: "I am not going to accept the TULF request. A boycott has never worked. There are some TULF politicians who are not prepared to learn anything from history. I appeal to them to give up this negative attitude".

Thondaman attended the All Party Conference. It was there that the framework for the settlement which was later embodied in the peace accord emerged. The government, which had insisted on the district development councils created in 1978 as the unit of devolution, agreed to accept the provincial council concept at this conference.

The government agreed to amend the constitution for that purpose and to devolve legislative, executive and financial powers to the provincial councils. Also, that the provincial councils should be elected bodies.

President Jayewardene submitted all these proposals in his opening speech. He concluded by saying: "Today we open a new chapter, for this is a decisive phase in the achievement of a political solution. We have to bring into this process so many groups — the citizens of Sri Lanka, the Government of India and all foreign governments interested in our welfare. Sri Lanka is a multi-racial, multi-religious country. Let past suspicions of the different groups be now be forgotten to secure a better future for all".

Thondaman wanted to keep up the momentum. He told the press: "We are now very close to a solution. We must not let this opportunity to slip. We must keep pressing. For us to snatch a deal, a unified Tamil leadership is essential. We cannot have so many different groups and hope to achieve a solution".

That was said on June 26. On July 2 he met President Jayewardene and they had a two-hour discussion

on ways and means of making the latest proposals acceptable to the Tamils. Thondaman impressed on the President the need to work out some institutional arrangement for the northern and eastern provincial councils to work together.

India then brought P. Chidamparam, Minister of State for Home, Pensions, Personnel and Public Grievances into the picture. He had a meeting with the Tamil militant groups in Madras and with the Sri Lanka government. He conveyed to Colombo the Tamil demand for the merger of the northern and eastern provinces and insisted on a suitable via media. Sri Lanka adopted Thondaman's suggestion and agreed to work out a suitable institutional arrangement for provincial councils — especially in the north and east — to consult with each other and act in co-ordination on matters of mutual interest and concern

That paved the way for a detailed discussion between the TULF delegation and the government on the subjects of devolution and land settlement. It was a lengthy and detailed discussion and most of the details were worked out. The TULF delegation and Dixit consulted Thondaman at every stage.

While the talks were on in Colombo, Thondaman had a 20-minute meeting with Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi on July 25. He stressed two things: that negotiations should not be allowed to drag on; and the hand of the TULF should be strengthened. He also said the on-going negotiations between the TULF and the Sri Lanka government were a positive development.

Later he told the media that Gandhi appeared hopeful and that India would probably step up its efforts to achieve a political settlement. On his way to Colombo he met both the Andhra Chief Minister Rama Rao and MGR. He advised them that they should accept the TULF as the representatives of the Tamils and strengthen their hand, to enable them to negotiate with authority.

At a press conference in Madras he expressed this point more forcefully. He said: "The Indian government and Tamil Nadu accept the TULF as the representatives of Sri Lanka Tamils. The militants are fighters.

They have said they will accept what the Tamil people accept. Their role is to fight. They should leave the negotiations to the TULF. They are the elected representatives of the Sri Lankan Tamils. They know what the people will accept".

He added that if the militants declared their objective, the TULF could negotiate towards that end. "Speaking in general terms will not help".

Thondaman said India was prepared to underwrite any agreement that emerged during the on-going negotiations in Colombo. "India has to come in as a guarantor because the Tamils are not prepared to trust the Sinhala leadership. They have been let down by both SLFP and UNP. They don't want that to happen again", he said.

The Sri Lanka-TULF talks helped to resolve most of the thorny problems, including law and order and land settlement. But the TULF was not satisfied. It wanted improvements in a few areas, such as the powers of the governor, state land, procedure regarding dissolution of the provincial council and setting up the provincial police service. Finally, the main Tamil demand for merger of the northern and eastern provinces was unresolved.

India sent its Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Natwar Singh and Chidamparam to Colombo for discussions with President Jayewardene. They broke journey in Madras for consultations with Tamil militant groups and the TULF. The Tamil groups stuck to their merger demand. They rejected outright Colombo's proposal to divide the Eastern Province into Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala areas and merge the Tamil areas with the Northern Province. The TULF suggested delinking the Sinhala areas in the Eastern Province and merging the rest with the north. The LTTE opposed it altogether.

The two ministers had two days of discussions in which Thondaman played an important role. From those discussions emerged what was later termed the December 19 proposals, which said the Amparai electoral district would be delinked from the Eastern Province and a provincial council established for the rest of the territory, which would constitute the new Eastern Province. Institutional linkage between the northern and eastern provin-

ces, which were earlier worked out, would be further refined. Sri Lanka also agreed to consider, at a later stage, a constitutional arrangement to bring the two provinces together; and to consider creation of the office of Vice-President.

The LTTE rejected the proposals as inadequate and not meeting the aspirations of the Tamil people. It opposed the delinking of the Amparai district.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lanka government also attempted to wriggle out of the December 19 proposal. The Muslim MPs were encouraged to oppose it. On December 26, 1986, Sri Lanka's High Commissioner Bernard Tilakaratne called on Foreign Secretary A. P. Venkateswaram and conveyed the Lankan government's reservations about the proposal. Colombo's message did not amount to a formal withdrawal of the offer but indicated second thoughts. India was taken aback by Colombo's backtracking and even annoyed because the entire negotiating process had been grounded.

Thondaman was disappointed and voiced his feelings to President Jayewardene and Athulathmudali. Making use of the LTTE's declaration that it was going to take over some functions of the civil administration in Jaffna, the government stopped the supply of petroleum to the peninsula, saying it wanted to immobilise LTTE vehicles. Two days later, on January 5, 1987 the supply of aluminium was suspended.

Rajiv Gandhi expressed concern and held special meetings of the political affairs committee of the Indian cabinet. The Indian Foreign Secretary, Venkateswaram, then conveyed India's concern about the presence in Sri Lanka of foreign mercenaries, which Sri Lanka denied. On January 12 Minister Gamini Dissanayake tried to stop the slide by assuring India that President Jayewardene stood by the December 19 proposals. But after army excesses at Kokkadicholai and other places Rajiv Gandhi sent a strong message on February 9 which read:

As far as the current military operations against Tamil civilians continue and other discriminatory measures like economic and communication blockades, affecting civilians, exist, India is not in a position to resume discussions with Tamil militants. While this is for the

present, India remains willing to resume the peace process if and when these actions are withdrawn.

2. India is firmly of the view that the proposals which emerged on December 19, after Mr. Natwar Singh and Mr. Chidambaram's visit to Colombo, must clearly be affirmed by the Government of Sri Lanka as a basis and only a starting point for further negotiations. India is also of the view that the final framework of a solution based on these proposals can only be forged when the Sri Lanka government and the Tamil side come together for negotiations.
3. If the government of Sri Lanka continues the economic blockade and military operations against Tamils, prospects of violence will increase. India's assessment is that the conflict will be prolonged and will escalate".

On February 13 President Jayewardene handed to Indian High Commissioner Dixit the following reply:

"The response to the Government of India's message being given below is predicated on the clear understanding that all further discussion to be held, or solutions to be evolved, shall be within the framework of the independence, territorial integrity and unity of Sri Lanka.

1. If the armed separatists (LTTE) agree to cease armed violent operations and related military preparations and desist from any activity aimed at setting up or interfering with the legal administration of the area, and this is announced by them; the Government of Sri Lanka will ensure that the armed forces will not carry out any further military operations in the area during this period.
2. When hostilities cease, in terms of para 1 above, the embargo (on the movement of certain commodities) now in force in the Jaffna peninsula will be lifted.

If the LTTE is prepared to attend talks with the representatives of the Government of Sri Lanka towards a peaceful solution of the ethnic problem, appropriate talks may be held in New Delhi with the assistance of the representatives of the Indian government. The Government of Sri Lanka expects

the Government of India to underwrite the implementation of any agreement reached

3. Upon the armed separatists giving up their arms, a vital step strengthening the administration, a general amnesty will be given to them by the President of Sri Lanka.
4. When talks towards a peaceful solution to the ethnic problem commences the Government of Sri Lanka will release those persons now held in custody under the Prevention of Terrorism Act who have no charges against them.
5. In all these proceedings the mediatory role and the good offices of the government of India is acknowledge and the government of Sri Lanka reaffirms that the results of the discussions held so far, including the proposals of December 19, 1986, will be the basis for evolving a durable solution.
6. The Government of Sri Lanka is agreeable to an early date being fixed for negotiations.
7. The Sri Lanka government has never carried out military operations against civilians nor ever will.

Thondaman was distressed about this development. He urged the government to lift the economic blockade of Jaffna and restart negotiations. He told the press that the government should not permit the situation to deteriorate. He warned that antagonising India would lead to disastrous consequences. When India called on Sri Lanka to halt military action Thondaman welcomed it. But the government reacted angrily.

On March 4, 1987 the cabinet decided to opt for a military action. Thondaman cautioned against it; but the majority favoured it. Two days later, on March 6, the government parliamentary group endorsed the resolution which called for military action. The resolution was moved by Harendra Corea who said the parliamentary group supported the government's effort to defend sovereignty. The group also supported the government's decision to reject India's call to halt military action unilaterally.

Thondaman was alone in opposing military action.

He warned the government of the inherent dangers. He warned that a military adventure would leave room for India to intervene.

But when he went to Madras he defended the government decision. The press asked him his opinion about the government parliamentary group's resolution. He replied: "What else do you expect the Sri Lanka government to do? No country in the world would tolerate it if a section of its people took up arms and declared a particular part of its territory its own".

On his return to Colombo on March 14, he again warned the Sri Lanka government of the dangers of the military solution. He said feeling in India had hardened. On March 13, at the 29th convention of the CWC in Kandy, he said: "While the Sri Lankan Tamil problem is essentially a national problem, it has its regional and international dimensions which cannot be ignored". Among his audience was President Jayewardene, the chief guest.

The government was in no mood to listen. The Habarana killings of Sinhala bus passengers, the Pettah and Maradana bomb explosions which killed more than 200 people, angered the government. The Rs. 50 million (Indian) that MGR gave the LTTE provoked the Sri Lanka government to launch its Vadamarachchi operation on May 28 1987. Rajiv reacted with the one-sentence message: "Military solutions will never work". On June 3, a flotilla of 19 boats travelled from Dhanuskodi to Jaffna with food, but was turned back by the Sri Lanka navy. The following day, on June 4, Indian airforce planes air-dropped relief to Jaffna.

Of the air-drop, Thondaman told *Time* magazine: "India was always thought of as being a vegetable. The perception in Sri Lanka was always that India would only bark and not bite". That was exactly the assessment in government top circles. A few days before the air-drop when foreign correspondents pointed to an Indian statement expressing concern about Sri Lanka's recourse to military action, President Jayewardene had retorted: "They can only express concern".

Thondaman did not play any role in the negotiations that led to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka

Pease Accord on July 29, 1987. But he has been a strong supporter of the accord, but never a blind supporter. He was critical of some of India's actions.

He felt India should have involved the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups in the negotiations. When Dileepan staged his fast and when Jaffna Tamils demonstrated against the Indian army, claiming a bigger role for the LTTE in the proposed interim administration of the north and east, Thondaman told this writer: "I thought Prabakaran was only a fighter, but now I feel he can blossom into a democratic leader". But he changed his assessment when the LTTE attacked the Indian army and forced the IPKF to fight. He said Prabakaran had made a fatal error and weakened the Tamil cause.

"It was because of Indian pressure that the Tamils were able to get concessions from the Sri Lanka government", he said. "and the Tamils should have made use of India to bring more concessions. The LTTE must realise that it is only through Indian intervention that more concessions can be obtained."

He appealed repeatedly to the LTTE to co-operate with India. "The Tamils of Sri Lanka cannot afford to forget the goodwill of India and the LTTE should not do anything that would scorn it", he said.

He told the press in Tamil Nadu on August 27, 1988 that a realistic approach was needed to implement the Indo-Lanka accord. "The Lankan Tamils wanted Indian intervention and India is interested in ensuring peace in the Tamil-speaking areas. It would be useful for both sides to arrive at an amicable political solution" he said.

He also pressed the Sri Lanka government to proclaim the merger of the northern and eastern provinces and hold elections, so that people of those provinces could elect their own administration.

He argued that the merger would, in the long run, be more beneficial to the Sinhala people than to the Tamils. He said: "If the merger does not take place there will be nothing to prevent the people of the north from declaring Eelam overnight, ignoring the cen-

tral government, since over 95 per cent of the people there are Tamils. On the other hand, if the merger of the north and east is made, then the other communities in the east can ensure that such a unilateral decision is not taken—and even if it is, the central government can annul it on the ground that the declaration of Eelam was not a unanimous act”.

Once the merger was proclaimed and elections held in the North-East Province, Thondaman was the first to devolve power to the provincial administration as stipulated in the 13th amendment to the constitution. The North-East Province chief minister Annamalai Varatharaja Perumal announced this publicly and praised Thondaman for his statesmanship.

Even in the controversial matter of the IPKF withdrawal Thondaman took a very practical and independent stand. He preferred private negotiations and public praise for the IPKF's role. He advocated tact and prudence. He said so publicly, even from the Mahiyangana Gam Udawa grounds where President Premadasa asked India to keep the IPKF within barracks.

Thondaman was able to chart an independent course because of the strength he derives from the CWC and the people he leads. “I’m what I am because of the CWC and my people”, he says repeatedly. “I never think that the CWC is there because of me. I believe that I am in this position because of the CWC and my people”, he says repeatedly.

But the CWC owes him much. He had led it into being one of the finest trade union organisations in the world. And that was no easy task. It cost him most of his time, energy and money. He has shepherded it since 1940, the year he became chairman of the Gampola branch of the CIC. And from the time of the split the effort has been his alone. Aziz left the CWC with almost all its offices. He even captured the Colombo head office. Thondaman asked Vellayan, then general secretary, to do something to get back the head office. “Leave it to me. I’ll deal with that”, Vellayan kept telling him. But he did not do anything.

Thondaman had to start afresh. He hired a new office. He started new files. He toured every district. He did not even go home. He spent all his time travelling sleeping in his car. He spent his own money. “It was a tremendous effort, a tremendous sacrifice”, Rajalingam once told this writer.

The success of the CWC depends on three main factors: organisational structure, financial control and discipline. The basic unit is the estate committee which controls affairs at the estate level. Above that is the district committee, comprising representatives of the estate committees. At the top is the executive committee composed of members elected by the district committees.

The CWC is run by a selected band of full-time officials who are paid. Thondaman claims that is one of the keys to the CWC's success. “Unless you devote your full attention to it, you cannot run an organisation efficiently”.

The monthly membership fee in the CWC is ten rupees. This is deducted from the pay roll and paid by the management to the CWC. Thondaman has introduced a very strict mechanism of financial control. Every cent is accounted for an every item of expenditure supervised.

Thondaman maintains personal contact and control of all CWC activities. He gets up at 5.30 a.m. and goes for a walk at 5.45 a.m. During his walk he generally meets a number of people whom he invites to walk and talk with him. He returns home at 6.30 a.m. and reads all English and Tamil newspapers. He is also available for consultation by district officials of the CWC, who phone him about their problem. At 8.30 a.m. he goes to CWC head office, where any CWC member may call on him. Around 25 to 30 people see him during this session. They come to him with varied problems which include obtaining passports, visas, letters of recommendations for jobs, disputes with estate officials. Some even bring him their family problems. Thondaman hears them all and attends to their needs immediately.

At 10 a.m. he goes to the Textile and Rural Industrial Development Ministry. There he sees people by appointment till 1 p.m. when he returns home for lunch. From

2.30 p.m. till 5 p.m. he again sees people on appointment and attends to official files. If there happen to be people from distant places he will see them till 6 p.m. Then he is available at home for consultations with CWC officials. He goes to bed after watching the Rupavahini news at 9.30 p.m.

On weekends he goes to the estates where he meets the estate and district officials. He also speaks at three or four meetings. Before these meetings he discuss with CWC officials whatever problems they may have.

Thondaman's current task is to transform the CWC into a creative national organisation. "The concept of the trade union is changing worldwide", he said in 1967 and added: "Today, the traditional concept of the trade union is giving way to more creative and constructive channels of action. The maximum opportunities must be provided so that future generations may have a better deal and grow into loyal and devoted citizens. We propose to embark on an economic program designed to develop skills among the young and equip them for self-employment".

Such training schemes have already been started at Kotagala and other places. He has got the CWC more involved in skills training and development programs.

His next attempt will be to develop the CWC into a national organisation. As early as 1957, addressing a public meeting at Welimada, Thondaman said: "There is no difference between the Sinhala and Tamil workers—their grievances are the same". He repeated that on March 14, 1986 at Madugalla estate. Wattegama with the Ven. Panvila Vimalasara Thera presiding. The bhikkhu himself asked Thondaman to make the CWC a national organisation and added: "All Lankans irrespective of race and religion should accept Mr. Thondaman's advice". A Sinhala worker S. Ranasinghe, said: "The Sinhalese should be proud of Mr. Thondaman who is famous for his integrity and sense of justice".

In his reply Thondaman said the fact that Sinhalese workers were joining the CWC and that they too were benefitting from the CWC struggle bestowed on it a national character. Refuting the oft repeated charge that the CWC was communal in its approach Thondaman said: "I do not consider the two major political parties

as national. Even if they say so, no one will accept it; their main concern was to look after the interests of the Sinhala community".

The CWC has recruited a considerable number of Sinhala workers in the Galle district and the prolonged and expensive strike it staged at Elephant House were intended to bring Sinhala workers into its fold. Thondaman wants the CWC to expand its activities to the industrial and transport sectors too.

While strengthening the trade union base in Sri Lanka, Thondaman also developed international links. In fact it was the international organisations that sought him out. Tom Bavin, founding father of the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers (IFPAAW) had heard of the CWC and came to Sri Lanka on a fact finding mission. His meeting with Thondaman started a personal friendship. The CWC became a member of IFPAAW and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

Thondaman was an obvious choice as the workers' delegate to the International Labour Organisation conference in Geneva and he was elected to its governing body in 1954. He held that position till he became a minister in 1978.

Among his friends and associates were past directors-general of ILO, the late David Morse and the late Wilfred Meany, president of the AFLCIO, the late Sir Vincent Tewson and the late Lord Feather, former general secretaries of the ICFTU. As CWC representative Thondaman made significant contributions to the ICFTU and IFPAAW and has the distinction of serving as a member of the executive board of the ICFTU and as senior vice-president of the ICFTU-ARD.

Thondaman's close co-operation with ILO, the ICTUF and IFPAAW resulted in tangible benefits to the workers' education programs; while his links with the ICFTU and IFPAAW have been of immense benefit to the CWC in organising workers' education and socio-economic development programs. The vocational training complex at Kotagala was set up with the assistance of the ICTUF.

Though busy with his trade union, political and social work, Thondaman remains strongly attached to his family. He was devoted to his wife Kothai and was shaken by her untimely death of December 26, 1983. But his grandchildren, born of his only son Ramanathan now Central Province Minister of Education, look after him.

He is especially attached to grandson Arumuga Thondaman — and even accompanied him on his honeymoon to New Deihi. Thondaman called on Rajiv Gandhi and at the end of the visit spoke of his grandson and bride Rajalakshmy, Rajiv wanted to meet the young couple and be photographed with them. Thondaman rushed delightedly back to the hotel and brought the blushing pair to Rajiv and Sonia who invited them to breakfast. Thondaman was thrilled with the group photograph. He sent a copy to the writer, asking that it be carried in the Daily News.

He personally attends to the needs his great-grand children. Every morning, before they leave for school they pay obeisance to him and he blesses them.

He is deeply religious. Daily poojas are performed in his name. He also believes in astrology and says astrology helped him to be appointed a member of parliament in July 1980. The CWC had supported the SLFP, headed by Mrs. Bandaranaike in the elections and she had promised to appoint two CWC members to parliament. After the election she stipulated that they should be other than Thondaman or Aziz. If it had to be one of them she would appoint only one. The CWC executive committee decided that it would be better to have one of their leaders rather than two others. Mrs. Bandaranaike then decided to nominate Thondaman, although Aziz was closer to the SLFP.

This choice was influenced by Rajalingam, then the court astrologer of the SLFP. Rajalingam wielded great influence with Mrs. Bandaranaike. It was he who decided the time she was to take the oath as Prime Minister.

Thondaman believes firmly in auspicious times and luck. He has been occupying the rented flat opposite Royal College for the last 25 years. When he became a minister many suggested his moving to a bigger house.

The government also offered him a flat, but he preferred to stay on in the old flat which he considers lucky.

He is sentimental, easily moved into tears by the misery or misfortune of others. On March 26, 1986, at the Yovunpura festival, the tears poured down his cheeks as he heard the tales of woe related by youths from the Northern Province. He vowed to do his utmost to help.

He is deeply moved by the plight of the poor. He listens patiently to their grievances and tries to find solutions for them. He is very happy in their midst and claims it makes him feel years younger. He repeatedly tells them: "When I am among you I feel young. That's because I derive my strength from you".

And he respects elders, however poor or illiterate. Years ago, a meeting was arranged in the Wattegama area and afterwards he was to be hosted to lunch in Kandy by a person of standing. Before the meeting was over, however an old woman, shrunken and wrinkled with years, walked up to Thondaman and cradling his face in her hands, invited him to lunch with her. The invitation was readily accepted.

A while later, squatting on the floor of the woman's line room, he ate off a plantain leaf and remarked how delicious the meal was.

His greatest wish now is to make these downtrodden people, still the weakest section of Lankan society, into a powerful, well knit community. His first priority towards that is to get every stateless person registered as a citizen. "That is a massive task, but it has to be done".

His next objective is to make them consider themselves as equal citizens. "They have been stateless for four decades. They have got used to being treated as second class human beings. They feel helpless, they feel weak, they fear others. This is a psychological problem. We must get them out of this inferiority complex".

To acquire upward mobility they must concentrate on education, Thondaman says. From the time he was elected to Nuwara Eliya in 1977, he has been concentrating on building an educational infrastructure of the

plantation sector. At the start, he got the allocation of Rs. 2.5 million under the decentralised budget and used it all to build school buildings.

Then he argued in the cabinet that the Indian Tamils were entitled to nine or ten seats in the basis of population, yet they had only one. He therefore, claimed an allocation of ten seats.

The cabinet agreed to give him Rs. 20 million annually. He spent the entire vote on education and estate schools now have decent buildings and facilities.

Through persistent campaigning Thondaman has impressed on plantation workers the necessity of educating their children. At every meeting he relates the story of the estate boy holding a top post in the World Bank.

On a recent estate visit a boy brought him an application form for the post of a clerk and asked him to certify it. He glanced through it and said: "You have got good results at the GCE (OL) Why do you want to be clerk?",

"I have no money to study further", the boy replied.

Thondaman called his father and told him sternly that he should "stop boozing" immediately and give the CWC the hundred rupees he thus saved. The CWC would pay an equal sum and that would meet the boy's education, he said. The boy passed his GCE (AL) and is now a teacher.

The CWC also offers educational scholarships. A new foundation called the Thondaman Foundation has now been set up to help educational activities. He has also persuaded India to grant more scholarships to students of Indian origin in Sri Lanka.

Saving is the other habit Thondaman wants to inculcate among Indian Tamils. He extols the virtues of savings in almost all his speeches. He considers the savings habit to be the most important because Indian Tamil labour is used to living in eternal debt.

Surveys have shown very high indebtedness among plantation workers. Two years ago, Thondaman arranged for the CWC to distribute post office savings books

among estate workers. He said that in future the practice of paying Pongal and Dipawali wage advances should be discontinued. "If you feel you should celebrate the festival learn to save the money for it", he says.

He has also been spearheading a campaign against alcoholism in the plantations. He describes that habit as having drained the strength of plantation workers. A special organisation called the Up-country Prohibition Organisation was created and its on-going massive campaigns have succeeded in containing the habit.

Housing is another area that Thondaman wants changed. The line room should be converted into single units and each house allocated a piece of land, he says.

The Indian Tamils up-country depend on the plantations for employment. This has led to unemployment and some sort of segregation in social life. Thondaman preaches the gospel of diversification to them. He has already popularised dairy farming and poultry keeping and encourages them to find avenues of self-employment. He has started vocation training centres and craft training institutions. The Congress Labour Foundation is being used for that purpose.

For Thondaman, the cabinet portfolio has never been an impediment to serving his people. He once said at a press interview: "My being a member of the government does not prevent my looking after the interests of my people. Of course, by being in the government I am at times unable to declare my views on certain issues. But I make my point within the government".

One such instance was in 1983, Vavuniya police informed the government that PLOT and other Tamil militant organisations were settling Indian Tamils on state land. Some cabinet ministers wanted to evict all such encroachers by declaring them terrorists. Thondaman resisted it. "Then all chena cultivators will have to be considered terrorists," he said.

The Cabinet decided to drop that move.

But on most important subjects Thondaman voiced his opinion in public. He explained that he always acted according to his conscience and had done what was right. Many failed to realise this special role. A pressman in Madras asked in November, 1987: "How can you con-

tinue in the cabinet while holding and expressing different views?"

Thondaman answered: That shows the extent to which democracy has matured in Sri Lanka. I hold different views on certain issues, but I am permitted to express my views and still continue in government.

Question: Many Tamils here feel that you have betrayed the Tamils by not resigning.

Thondaman: If I resign, the estrangement between the communities will be completed. Then I have no role to play. It is by not resigning that I can mediate and find a solution. I believe in playing a constructive role, not a destructive one.

Question: It looks as though you are opposed to Eelam.

Thondaman: Let's be practical. The government is not willing to grant a separate state. At the same time we cannot permit the Tamil people to live in this insecure state for ever. So we must search for a solution that will guarantee the rights and security of the Tamils within the confines of a single state. This is the practical approach I am adopting. Other approaches will lead to disaster for both communities.

This type of pragmatic approach has earned for Thondaman a general respect from all communities. The usually critical **Weekend** columnist 'Momus' wrote on January 12, 1986: "Whatever one may think of Mr. Thondaman and his politics, it cannot be denied that he is God's gift to his people. Not only is he the very avatar of the Almighty to the Indian Tamils whom he represents, but he is also able to convince us of his divine touch when he demonstrates again and again his effortless way of wringing major concessions from the majority government to advance the interests of his closeted clan".

For the vast majority of the Indian Tamils Thondaman is more than a man; he is a god. In 1978, a few days after he was sworn in as the Minister of Rural Industrial Development, Martin Walker of the **Guardian** visited an estate in Nuwara Eliya, and went to several

line rooms. In every one of them he found pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses. Among them he invariably found a photograph of a thoughtful Thondaman. Martin was struck by this and questioned these people.

Martin: Arn't these your Gods?

Workers: Certainly, they are.

Martin: But Thondaman certainly is not a god. He is only your leader.

Workers: You are mistaken, Sir. The other gods are whom we pray to and have never seen. But this is the god we have seen with our own eyes.

Martin: What do you mean?;

Workers: We make vows to gods and appeal to them. We offer poojas and wait for years for our wishes to come true. In this case we go to the union office and send a letter to our leader Thondaman and succour comes forthwith.

That was in 1978. Now, for them, he is the deliverer. A leader who has led them out of dust, out of bondage, a leader who has transformed a weak, downtrodden community into a strong and influential entity. What more evidence is needed for this achievement than that today three Indian Tamil leaders are holding ministerial portfolios, and another two provincial council ministerships, a first-time feat in Sri Lanka's history.

Thondaman is not only a deliverer of his people; he is also a staunch champion of Tamil rights and the unity of Sri Lanka. His service to Sri Lankan people will be recorded in history. He helped avert an unnecessary Indo-Sri Lanka war.

CHAPTER 13

A WAR AVERTED

If not for Thondaman's efforts Sri Lanka and India might have fought a war on July 29, 1989. That calamity was averted by an urgent midnight message which Thondaman transmitted to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi through the Indian High Commission in Colombo on Thursday, July 27.

That urgent message was 'faxed' after the three-hour special cabinet meeting held at the cabinet office that evening.

War clouds had gathered on the horizon when the cabinet met at 7 p.m. The Defence Ministry had prepared the draft of the ultimatum, the President had decided to issue to the IPKF on Friday. In his ultimatum the President had wanted the Indians to do four things: to withdraw from Sri Lanka on July 29; if that was not possible to withdraw to barracks and negotiate the logistics of withdrawal with the Lankan security forces, who would take control of law and order functions in the North-East Province; to cease hostilities against the LTTE; and to cooperate with the committee Sri Lanka would appoint to monitor cessation of hostilities.

The Defence Ministry had decided the ultimatum would be delivered at 3 p.m. on Friday, July 28. The order was to be taken by a senior army officer by helicopter to Trincomalee and given personally to IPKF commander Lt. Gen. Amajit Singh Kalkat. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka had boosted its troop strength in the camps of the North-East Province.

The Indians were preparing for confrontation too. Gandhi had informed the Lok Sabha, the Indian lower house of parliament, on July 18, that India would not withdraw and Colombo had to take responsibility for the consequences if Lankan forces were ordered out of the barracks to which they were confined in terms of the peace accord signed on July 29, 1989.

Lt. Gen Kalkat himself repeated that warning on the evening of July 27, a few hours before the crisis cabinet meeting. He told Indian journalists the IPKF would attack if Lankan soldiers came out of barracks.

He said: "My mandate includes the provision of security and peace for all in the North-East Province and to keep the Lankan forces in their barracks. Any change in the mandate by force and my soldiers will reply to it. Ongoing operations against the LTTE will continue despite Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne's demand for a unilateral ceasefire. We will not tolerate any violence and the IPKF is fully prepared to meet any eventuality".

He also charged that Colombo had sent additional troops to the Lankan security forces' camps in the North-East Province. He said 2000 additional soldiers had been moved to Vavuniya. He had ordered the Indian troops to take defensive positions outside the airports in the North-East Province. Indian troops had also been placed around the Lankan camps; Indian naval movement was reported at Karainagar Naval Base. The aircraft carrier 'INS Virat' had been moved close to Sri Lanka, just 24 kilometers from Colombo. Four air force squadrons with Mirage and MIG 235 were moved to South-India. A contingent of 120 crack airforce commandos were airlifted to Ratmalana and kept at India House, the official residence of the Indian High Commissioner. The Indian High Commission staff had been moved to Hotel Taj Samudra.

It was in this tense and confrontational setting that the special cabinet meeting was held on July 27. The air was heavy with a sense of uncertainty as the ministers assembled in the British built old Senate building and sat round the oval, teak panelled table. No way out of a Sri Lanka-India confrontation seemed possible.

President Premadasa, who presided, briefed the ministers on the talks Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne had with Indian High Commissioner Lankan Lal Mehrotra in the past three days. He informed them that the talks had failed. India had refused to accept the two conditions he had stipulated for Sri Lanka to accept the Indian invitation for talks in New Delhi, Indian Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao had extended this invitation to Wijeratne when they met at Harare, Zambian capital, in May. The President then in-

formed the ministers of his decision to issue the IPKF with an ultimatum. He read out the draft, clause by clause. He paused at the end of each clause for comments. There was no comment on the first two: The order to the IPKF to withdraw by July 29; and the order to the IPKF to stay in barracks till they withdraw.

To the third clause—of ceasing hostilities against the LTTE—Minister of Agriculture Lalith Athulathmudali suggested a change. He said it should be 'suspension of hostilities' rather than 'cessation of hostilities'. The President accepted it, and the other suggestion that the section on the monitoring committee be dropped.

The meeting had almost come to an end. The President had obtained the concurrence of the cabinet for the ultimatum to the IPKF. Thondaman was uneasy. He looked around him: all were silent. Prime Minister D. B. Wijetunge then leaned towards him and said: "Thonda! Something should be done to avert a confrontation". Thondaman nodded assent. He had already decided to speak against the ultimatum.

He started with the least offensive argument, an argument acceptable to all. He spoke of the traditional friendship between Sri Lanka and India. He spoke of the religious and cultural ties between the peoples of the two countries. He spoke of Buddhism and Hinduism and their spread from India to Sri Lanka. "Sir, I am a Hindu and you are a Buddhist. Both religions came from India. Both religions preach non-violence. We must try and prevent a war between the two countries", he argued. The response was hopeful.

He then spoke of his meeting with Gandhi two weeks earlier and said Gandhi was full of goodwill towards Sri Lanka and President Premadasa. "Gandhi was keen to resolve the conflict through negotiations. I know, Sir, that you too have immense goodwill towards India and Rajiv. I know you too are anxious to resolve the conflict through negotiation. So why don't both of you talk?"

President Premadasa replied that he was always ready to talk, but the Indians should accept him as commander-in-chief of all the forces on Lankan soil and take orders from him.

• Thondaman argued that Sri Lanka should not insist on such conditions. "The JVP is not taking orders from you, sir". He argued that even in that last moment they should try to avoid a confrontation.

President Premadasa lost his cool. "Do you want me to fall at the feet of the Indians?" he asked angrily.

Thondaman replied: "No sir, you should not do that. I'll never agree to your doing that. What I say is that we must talk to them instead of fight them. After all, they have invited us for talks—why not accept, without pre-conditions?"

He then spoke of the futility of fighting a powerful country like India. A war with India would hurt both countries but especially Sri Lanka he said.

Athulathmudali took the argument from there. He said the President's position that the IPKF should withdraw was correct. It was also valid from a strict legalistic standpoint. India's position of linking the devolution process to the IPKF withdrawal was weak—but Sri Lanka could not fight India without doing herself the greater injury. Negotiation was the best remedy.

Plantation Industries Minister Gaminj Dissanayake also supported Thondaman's plea for negotiation without pre-conditions. He argued eloquently about the danger of fighting a big country. He said tension between the two countries had reached a high pitch and stressed that it should be defused before something 'untoward' happened.

Tension had in fact been building since June 1, when President Premadasa made his call for the withdrawal of the IPKF by July 29 at a religious ceremony at the Chit-tavivekaramaya Buddhist temple at Battaramulla, on the outskirts of Colombo. At that meeting the President had first thanked India and Prime Minister Gandhi for sending the IPKF to help keep peace in Sri Lanka's north and east. He thanked the IPKF for the tremendous sacrifices it had made. He said the IPKF was sent to the country on the invitation of former President Junius Jayewardene and the accord implied that the Indian forces would be withdrawn at the request of the Lankan president.

He said: "The end of July, 1989, will mark two years since the IPKF came to Sri Lanka. Therefore I will request the Indian government to try as far as possible to complete the withdrawal of the entirety of the IPKF troops by the end of July. I should like to see the last of the IPKF troops leaving Sri Lanka by the end of July. There are about 45,000 IPKF troops in Sri Lanka today, therefore it is not possible to withdraw them in a day or two. They have to leave by ship. I believe therefore that if the troop withdrawal is expedited it should be possible to complete withdrawal by the end of July".

President Premadasa gave two reasons for his request: The IPKF pull-out would help to create conducive conditions for an internal settlement of the problems that had led groups to resort to violence; and it would help Sri Lanka to host the SAARC summit with dignity and self-respect.

At that time New Delhi and Colombo had already been negotiating a speedier troop withdrawal. The withdrawal had started on January 2 when over 1 000 soldiers, their arms and ammunition, were shipped from Trincomalee. The withdrawal was announced by the then Indian High Commissioner J. N. Dixit, at a hastily called press briefing on New Year's Day. Dixit said the withdrawal was India's present to President Premadasa, who was to be sworn in as the new President the next day, January 2, in Kandy. He said it was a voluntary decision by India to show her goodwill and to demonstrate her anxiety to pull out her troops as soon as possible.

India pulled out 3,000 soldiers and their armaments in the first week of January and followed up with a further withdrawal of 7,000 men in April. Dixit had also told Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne that they intended to withdraw more troops in June and the bulk by December, leaving only nine divisions — about 9,000 soldiers. But he had insisted that the central government should devolve adequate powers to the North-East Provincial Council, to make it viable and effective.

The withdrawal of the IPKF had been talked about in government circles in the last week of May. It came up as a result of the agitation mounted by the Sinhala extremist group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The President was concerned that the JVP was using the

IPKF presence as a patriotic issue, to spread its own influence.

This concern was first expressed at the cabinet meeting of May 24. President Premadasa said the withdrawal of the IPKF would take the wind out of the JVP sail. He asked the ministers to submit notes on how the IPKF issue should be handled. He told them the LTTE, with which he had been talking, also wanted the withdrawal of the IPKF.

The issue cropped up again on May 31, at the Wednesday cabinet meeting, when the ministers discussed the security situation under 'Any Other Business'. Thondaman suggested a fuller discussion and President Premadasa said it could be held the following day, at the meeting of the Political Affairs Committee. He asked the ministers to come ready with their suggestions and views.

When the cabinet meeting ended Foreign Minister Wijeratne addressed the weekly press conference at the Information Ministry. He was questioned about the IPKF issue. He replied that, that matter had cropped up at the cabinet meeting and it was decided to consider it in detail the next evening, at the meeting of the Political Affairs Committee. He also disclosed that negotiations were on about the IPKF withdrawal and India had indicated that it would pull out two more battalions by July 25.

Wijeratne told pressmen on a later occasion that Dixit had told him India had been considering a timetable for withdrawal: half the troops by July and the bulk of the rest by December, leaving a nominal strength behind to help the North-East Provincial Council.

Thondaman prepared a note on the IPKF pull-out and handed it to President Premadasa on the morning of June 1. President Premadasa was pleased with it.

Thondaman's note read:

1. It has become necessary for a decision to be made on the future of the IPKF in Sri Lanka. Is their continued presence here essential?

2. The IPKF came to this country in July-August, 1987 and there is no doubt that they have done much to reduce tension. But there is a stalemate today. And it does not seem that there is anything more the IPKF can do.

3. In these circumstances, a parting of ways has become inevitable. But it is essential that the parting must be such that Sri Lanka's relations with India are not in any way impaired.

4. I think a proper climate and a suitable atmosphere must be created so that the IPKF can withdraw with dignity, under the friendliest auspices — with a great deal of conch blowing and departure tamashas.

5. It is necessary, for this, to keep the following in mind:

(a) India and the IPKF must be profusely thanked for what they have done. There must be fulsome praise

(b) There must be not the slightest hint that the IPKF was withdrawing under pressure, or because of bad relations between Sri Lanka and India.

6. Admittedly, a foreign army is an irritant, but the IPKF having been invited by the Sri Lankan Government under an accord, its withdrawal must be so managed and arranged that it must appear to be something mutually agreed on, in another accord — faking out that the IPKF has fulfilled all that was necessary under the 1987 accord.

7. Tactfully handled I see no difficulty in creating the necessary scenario for the withdrawal of the IPKF under the most friendly terms.

President Premadasa thanked Thondaman for his advice. His reply, dated June 3, reads:

My dear Minister,

I thank you for your note on the IPKF.

I have noted the contents of same. I am in agreement with you on the strategy outlined by you to ensure the withdrawal of the IPKF.

But around noon on Thursday, President Premadasa made a public call for the withdrawal of the IPKF. That evening he reported to the Political Affairs Committee on his Battaramulla speech, saying he would make a formal request for withdrawal within the next two days.

The request was sent on Saturday, June 3, through Foreign Secretary Bernard Tilakaratne. The politely worded seven-paragraph letter said: ".....I would like all IPKF personnel to be withdrawn from Sri Lanka by July 31st, 1989".

It thanked the IPKF for its sacrifices and reminded the Indian Prime Minister of his promise that the IPKF would be withdrawn if the President of Sri Lanka called for it. It said the IPKF presence had become a divisive issue and the IPKF pull-out would help him to win the trust and confidence of the people of Sri Lanka. The IPKF withdrawal would also help him to host the SAARC summit meeting.

The President said he had seen the aide memoire the Indian High Commissioner had delivered that evening which referred to the need for consultations and that Foreign Secretary Tilakaratne would personally clarify matters.

Tilakaratne met Gandhi on June 5 and had an hour-long meeting with him. He explained the compulsions on President Premadasa and how an IPKF pull out would help him. Gandhi replied that India had guaranteed the agreement and was duty bound to safeguard the interests of the Tamil people. He stressed that devolution of powers had to be speeded up and completed quickly. He also said two months were insufficient to effect a total pull-out.

This meeting was followed by a war of words between both sides. On June 14, at Bangalore, Gandhi rejected the call for withdrawal. He said the accord was a bilateral agreement and one party could not abrogate it unilaterally. He also linked withdrawal to devolution of powers to the North-East Provincial Council. He repeated the same thing at Madras the next day.

At his I...
The Colombo...
June 14, that if India, so willed, it was capable of with-

drawing its entire forces before the July 20 deadline. "You all know how fast they came. They can also go back with the same speed", he said.

Gandhi replied to the letter on June 20. In it he said the devolution of power to the North-East Provincial Council and IPKF withdrawal should proceed simultaneously. He warned that if the promised autonomy was not given to the Tamils, the claim of some Tamil groups that they could not expect justice within a united Sri Lanka would gain credence. He said a return to the pre-accord situation would be dangerous.

On June 23, speaking at the Gam Udawa opening, President Premadasa repeated his call for the withdrawal of the IPKF and added that if India could not withdraw its forces before July 29 it should keep them within barracks.

Meanwhile, the government began talks with the LTTE. On June 29, the LTTE announced cessation of hostilities with the Lankan forces. President Premadasa immediately telexed Gandhi about the LTTE announcement and asked him to ensure that the IPKF ceased hostilities against the LTTE.

The next day, June 30, he replied to Gandhi's letter of June 20. He rejected the argument that the troop withdrawal and the devolution process were linked. He said the government was doing everything possible to speed up the process of devolution. He referred to the on-going talks with the LTTE and claimed the IPKF presence was hindering any solution to the ethnic problem.

Gandhi replied immediately through the high commission in Colombo. The peace accord, he said, had provided for the cessation of hostilities between the LTTE and the Lankan armed forces by ensuring that the Lankan forces were confined to barracks.

President Premadasa replied contesting that assertion. After the accord, he argued, 148 Lankan police and service personnel had been killed and 80 wounded; 481 civilians were killed and 115 injured; and the Indian armed forces had been unable to prevent those killings.

Aware that the situation was hotting up, Thondaman asked for a private meeting with President Premadasa. There he impressed on the Lankan President the absolute necessity of handling the matter more diplomatically. The President readily agreed with him. He pulled out a printed copy of the Battaramulla speech and read out several extracts from it to Thondaman. So, hadn't he thanked the Indians for their help, as Thondaman advised? Hadn't he been very courteous? He suggested that they await Gandhi's reply to his letter of June 30.

On July 5, President Premadasa wrote again, saying the LTTE's cessation of hostilities had been extended to all people and groups in Sri Lanka, thereby implying that the LTTE had agreed not to attack the EPRLF.

In the first week of July, Thondaman went to India to attend the SAARC trade union conference. He took the opportunity to call on Gandhi.

During that 25-minute meeting he urged that the withdrawal issue should be settled amicably. He told the Indian Prime Minister that President Premadasa was anxious to solve the issue peacefully; and he explained the pressures the Lankan President was facing.

"The Sinhala people fear that the Indian army will never leave Sri Lanka. The JVP is exploiting that fear. That is the main reason President Premadasa wants the IPKF to leave Sri Lanka", Thondaman told Gandhi.

Gandhi was very appreciative. He explained his own concerns and compulsions. He explained that India had signed the accord as guarantor, with the promise that India would obtain for the Tamils such autonomy as was enjoyed by the Indian states. It was on that promise that the Tamil militant groups had agreed to lay down arms and enter mainstream politics.

"If Colombo devolves power to the Tamils I will gladly recall my troops. Tell your government to honour its obligations. Tell your President that I am not prepared to be called a betrayer by the Tamils. Tell your President that I had very good working arrangements with former President Jayewardene and I would like to have a similar relationship with him", Gandhi said.

Thondaman met the Indian press at New Delhi and in Madras after that meeting. He told them: "Gandhi takes a very positive approach, which make me feel the deadlock can be broken". He added: "Gandhi and Narasimha Rao are anxious to avoid a confrontation".

In Madras he met Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi and found him anxious to fall in line with Indian government. Karunanidhi wanted Thondaman to make an effort to forge unity among the Tamil militant groups. Thondaman agreed, but said the initiative should come from the militants themselves.

Indian Foreign Ministry officials did not share Thondaman's optimism. They told the press that India considered the troop pull-out linked with implementation of the terms of the accord. They reiterated their offer of negotiations on the devolution of powers to the North-East Provincial Council and the IPKF withdrawal.

Gandhi replied on July 11 to President Premadasa's letters of June 30 and July 5. He maintained that the peace accord was an agreement between two countries meant to preserve the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka and ensure the safety, security and legitimate interests of the Tamils. The withdrawal and the implementation of the accord had to be simultaneous and the time table for that should be worked out through consultations.

He referred to his meeting with Thondaman and said: "Your colleague, the Hon. Mr. Thondaman, who met me here, would have conveyed to you our desire for friendly relations and our willingness to resolve any misunderstandings through mutual consultations". He also invited Foreign Minister Wijeratne to New Delhi for talks.

President Premadasa replied the next day, setting out the four premises which India should accept if Sri Lanka was to agree to the talks. They were: India to accept President Premadasa as commander-in-chief of all the forces on Lankan soil; that the July 29, 1987 agreement was between Sri Lanka and India and no other party was involved; that the presence of Indian armed forces in Sri Lanka and the devolution of power were unconnected; and that India should not allow its territory to be used for anti-Sri Lankan activities.

He then said India was bound to withdraw her forces if asked to do so; and that the IPKF had failed to cease hostilities with the LTTE although he had requested it. The LTTE had assured him that it was committed to entering the political mainstream and had given him an undertaking that its cessation of hostilities extended to all Tamil groups. If those positions were accepted he said, he would consider having discussions with India.

Gandhi, who left for Paris to attend the bi-centenary celebrations of the French Revolution, sent his principal secretary, B. G. Deshmukh, to talk to President Premadasa in a bid to resolve the conflict. Deshmukh arrived on July 13 and met President Premadasa on the same day, delivering Gandhi's message that the IPKF withdrawal should be resolved through talks. The meeting failed to produce any results.

Deshmukh also met Thondaman and told him that Gandhi was annoyed with the four premises the President had laid down. Thondaman commented that had he not been delayed in Madras he could have persuaded President Premadasa not to stipulate such conditions.

Deshmukh flew to Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan to report the results of his discussions to Gandhi—and from then Gandhi toughened his stance. At New Delhi airport on July 19 he said he would not withdraw the IPKF; he observed caustically that none of the 30 world leaders, including the American, Soviet and Pakistan leaders with whom he had discussions in Paris, had once raised the Lankan issue. "The message I got was that no one is interested in Sri Lanka", he said.

Meanwhile, TULF leaders Amirthalingam and Yogeswaran were killed in Colombo. India made full use of it for propaganda. President Premadasa also stepped up Sri Lanka's campaign and demanded the IPKF withdrawal.

On July 19, President Premadasa wrote another letter to Gandhi, clarifying Sri Lanka's position, claiming that it had done its part to devolve power to the provincial council; he added that any argument by India that it would have to keep the IPKF in Sri Lanka until that process was completed was untenable.

July 19 was a Wednesday and the weekly cabinet meeting was held at 7 p.m. Thondaman spoke his mind

that evening. He spoke for more than an hour. He traced the history of the traditionally close relationship between

India and Sri Lanka. He spoke of the need to preserve it. He told the cabinet Gandhi was anxious to resolve the conflict through negotiations. He argued that Sri Lanka should accept the invitation for talks without pre-conditions. Both Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake spoke in support of talking with India.

The next day India announced that if Colombo did not accept the invitation for talks on the IPKF pull-out India would work out its own plan for phased withdrawal. "We are in the process of taking a decision on a phased withdrawal", an Indian Foreign Ministry spokesman said in New Delhi.

On July 25, just four days prior to the deadline, Indian High Commissioner Mehrotra handed the Foreign Secretary a letter and a note from New Delhi: India reiterated its readiness to withdraw the IPKF and wanted Sri Lanka to implement the peace accord. Foreign Minister Wijeratne was invited to Delhi for talks. No mention was made of cessation of hostilities against the LTTE.

President Premadasa replied promptly: Colombo preferred government-to-government talks; and that the IPKF should cease its hostilities against the LTTE.

This was the backdrop to the cabinet meeting on July 26. Again Thondaman raised the IPKF withdrawal issue. It was agreed to hold a special cabinet meeting on Thursday, July 27, to consider it.

The next morning, at the press conference, Wijeratne told pressmen that he would go to New Delhi provided India accepted the President as commander-in-chief of all forces on Lankan soil and agreed to cease hostilities against the LTTE. He also disclosed that talks were already going on to resolve the conflict between India and Sri Lanka.

Thondaman realised that the matters were getting out of hand. He got the political committee of the Ceylon Workers' Congress to pass a resolution authorising its leadership to take the initiative to avert a confrontation between Sri Lanka and India. The resolution requested India to recommence the phased withdrawal of the IPKF

begun in January, 1989, stating that its stoppage had bred suspicions and misunderstanding in Sri Lanka. It blamed Sri Lanka for boycotting the SAARC foreign ministers' conference in early July and urged talks with India.

The resolution concluded: "The Political Committee of the CWC calls upon the governments of Sri Lanka and India to take immediate steps to review the situation with a view to re-establishing the friendly relations which have traditionally existed between the two countries.

"The political committee also authorises the leadership of the CWC to take whatever initiative it may think fit to help bring about better relations between Sri Lanka and India to end the current impasse."

At the July 27 cabinet meeting Thondaman played exactly that role. He went to that meeting determined to take some initiative to end the impasse. After Gamini Dissanayake had finished his speech Thondaman spoke again. He urged acceptance of the Indian invitation to Wijeratne for talks. There was general consensus that the invitation should be accepted.

"Now let's formulate our basic position", Thondaman said.

"For what purpose?", some ministers asked.

"No sir, we are not going to send our foreign minister there to eat lunches and dinners", he replied.

There was good humoured laughter in which the President joined. Tension eased; they were all feeling more relaxed.

Thondaman asked Lalith Athulathmudali who sits next to him at the cabinet sessions to write down the points. The first point he suggested, should be a request by Sri Lanka's President to the Indian Prime Minister to recommence withdrawal on July 29.... It was agreed. The second point was about the discussions, the third concerned the cessation of military operations by the IPKF against the LTTE.

Athulathmudali drafted the formula as follows:

1. The President of Sri Lanka has requested the Prime Minister of India to re-commence the withdrawal of the

Indian Armed Forces contingent. A significant withdrawal will recommence by 29th July, 1989.

2. The Governments of India and Sri Lanka will forthwith commence discussions in Delhi and Colombo to draw up a time-table for the complete and expeditious withdrawal of the Indian Armed Forces contingent from Sri Lanka.

3. The IPKF will, upon commencement of the discussions, suspend all offensive military operations in the northern and eastern provinces.

Athulathmudali told the cabinet the third point as it stood did not specify the period of suspension of hostilities. He suggested the clause 'until the conclusion of the discussions' be included at the end of the third point within parenthesis. It was accepted and included.

Thondaman asked the cabinet staff to type it. It was typed on an ordinary piece of paper without a government letterhead. It did not bear any signature. President Premadasa has wanted the formula to go as Thondaman's own proposal and not the government's. Thondaman agreed.

It was a little past 11 p.m. when Thondaman rushed to India House with his formula. The Sri Lanka Air Force sentries who stood guard outside recognised Thondaman and allowed him to approach the gate. Hearing footsteps, Indian Black Cat commandos guarding the Indian High Commissioner's residence from within, opened the gate holding their weapons aloft. An official of the high commission recognised Thondaman and told him that the high commissioner was at the high commission office.

Thondaman rushed there and sought an immediate meeting with High Commissioner Mehrotra. He was ushered in and surprised Mehrotra received him warmly.

"I've come with an urgent message to be sent to Rajiv", Thondaman said showing Mehrotra the typed paper he was carrying. The high commissioner read it but was unenthusiastic.

"I'm sorry. This formula will not be acceptable to India", he said. "Things have gone too far to save the situation".

"If this is not acceptable, let us sit together and see how it can be made acceptable to India", Thondaman persisted.

"Some major amendments are necessary", Mehrotra insisted.

"We will first see how it can be made acceptable to both countries," Thondaman replied.

Taking out his pen, Mehrotra made two amendments to the first clause. He deleted the phrase 'Indian Armed Forces contingent' and substituted it with 'IPKF'. He then scratched out the words 'A significant' and substituted the word 'The'. The clause amended read: "I. The President of Sri Lanka has requested the Prime Minister of India to recommence the withdrawal of the IPKF. The withdrawal will re-commence by 29th July, 1989".

Mehrotra made extensive amendments in clause two and wanted clause three dropped altogether. He suggested a new one. As suggested by Mehrotra those clauses read:

"2. The Government of India and Sri Lanka will forthwith commence discussions in Delhi and Colombo to discuss all issues of mutual concern including the time-table for the withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka and the implementation of the Indo-Lanka agreement.

"3. A Sri Lankan delegation led by the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka will visit India on 28th and 29th July, for this purpose".

The second and third clauses were then combined and the draft read: "The governments of India and Sri Lanka will forthwith commence discussions in Delhi and Colombo to discuss all issues of mutual concern including the time-table for the withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka, and the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement.

Thondaman insisted that the message be sent to Gandhi immediately Mehrotra was reluctant. He said Gandhi would be sleeping.

"Let this be the first thing he sees in the morning", Thondaman pleaded.

"I shall be sending this as your formula. Will the Government of Sri Lanka accept this?", Mehrotra asked.

"I give you my assurance that I will persuade the President to accept it if India is agreeable".

Mehrotra finally despatched the message as Thondaman's formula.

It was around 2 a.m. when Thondaman left the Indian High Commission.

At 10 a.m. the next day Thondaman telephoned Wijeratne and suggested a meeting. Wijeratne went to Thondaman's flat opposite Royal College.

Thondaman told Wijeratne that the message sent to Delhi was not materially different from the formula they had agreed to the previous night "We have only played with words", he said.

Wijeratne left to brief the President.

Wijeratne was contacted by Mehrotra soon afterward. He said Gandhi wanted other amendments made. India had taken the view that the Lankan Foreign Minister must visit Delhi to negotiate the IPKF withdrawal and implementation issues of the Indo-Lanka Agreement.

Wijeratne observed that Delhi had dropped the question of suspension of hostilities in the northern and eastern provinces. Mehrotra contacted Gandhi. Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao and Foreign Secretary S. K. Singh were then at Gandhi's residence. After consulting Gandhi, Singh suggested a compromise by agreeing to discuss the cessation of hostilities at the Delhi talks.

The compromise was reached around 3.30 p.m. on Friday. Mehrotra and Lankan Foreign Secretary Bernard Tilakaratne signed the joint communique which was released simultaneously at Colombo and New Delhi at 4 p.m. on Friday.

The communique, which took over the sentences from Thondaman's formula reads:

"The President of Sri Lanka has requested the Prime Minister of India to recommence the withdrawal of the IPKF. The withdrawal will recommence on July 29.

"The High Commissioner reiterated the invitation of the Minister of External Affairs of the Government of India to visit India, to discuss the time schedule for the withdrawal of the remaining IPKF contingent in Sri Lanka.

"During the visit of the delegation, the question of the cessation of offensive military operations by the IPKF and the safety and security of all communities in the North-Eastern Province of Sri Lanka will also be discussed".

The final communique contained all the points on which Thondaman had got the cabinet to agree. Labour Minister Ranjit Atapattu was the first to congratulate Thondaman for helping Sri Lanka avoid a confrontation with India. He told him he had saved the country from a difficult situation. President Premadasa telephoned Thondaman to congratulate him. Lifting the receiver Thondaman said: "Sir, I congratulate you", to which the president replied: "It is you I must congratulate for the correct advice you gave me".

Under the agreement India made a token pull-out of 600 soldiers from Trincomalee and a high level delegation led by Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne flew to New Delhi for talks. That diffused the crisis and averted war.

Thondaman deeply wanted the talks to succeed. Unless they succeeded the gains of his efforts would only be temporary, he said. He was aware of the complexity of the problem and the difficulties involved in working out a solution. He felt that unless the talks were conducted at very high political level a solution would be difficult.

So he wrote a personal letter to Gandhi, advising him to lift the talks to the highest level. Bureaucrats would take a narrow legalistic view of the issues, he said in his letter.

Gandhi heeded his advice and took personal charge of the negotiations. His meetings with Ranjan

Wijeratne and A. C. S. Hamood, the two ministers in the Lankan delegation, actually saved the talks from breaking down. His personal intervention and President Premadasa's direct contact with Wijeratne and Hamood resulted in the two delegations narrowing their differences to a considerable extent.

Lankan delegation returned to Colombo on August 5, after seven days of intense deliberations with a position paper which gave the respective stand the two countries took on the four main issues discussed. The two issues raised by Sri Lanka were: time schedule for IPKF withdrawal and cessation of offensive military operations by the IPKF. On the first Sri Lanka wanted the withdrawal to be completed by the middle of September and India wanted time till February 1990. In the second Sri Lanka wanted IPKF to cease hostile operations immediately and without laying down any qualifications by reciprocating LTTE ceasefire. India offered to suspend offensive military operations for 15 days which would be extended once the LTTE joins and participates in the North-East Peace Committee.

The Peace Committee to be chaired by a Sri Lankan cabinet minister would comprise representatives of all Tamil militant groups and Tamil political parties, India had said. It should take action to bring back peace in the North-East Province. The decision of the committee would have to be unanimous.

The two issues India raised were: review of the implementation of the Indo-Lanka Agreement of July 1987 and the arrangement for the safety and security of all communities in the North-East province. On the first there was agreement. India accepted Lanka's request not to link the implementation of the agreement with the withdrawal. Lanka reciprocated by clarifying the action so far taken to devolve power to the North-East Provincial Council and the steps to be taken to set up the Provincial Police Force and to facilitate the effective functioning of the provincial councils.

On the second Sri Lanka agreed to set up a committee to review and coordinate security arrangements during the withdrawal of the IPKF. India accepted it. Sri Lanka wanted the committee to comprise the Com-

mander of the Sri Lanka Army, the General Officer Commanding the IPKF, the IGP of Sri Lanka and the Governor of the North-East Province. India accepted the first three but wanted the Chief Minister of the North-East Province instead of the Governor.

Minister Wijeratne reported to President Premadasa on the Indian proposal soon after his arrival. President Premadasa summoned a special meeting of the cabinet on Monday August 7 to consider India's proposals. The president tabled the Indian proposals at the meeting and announced that he wanted to place them before parliament to get the opinion of the opposition parties. He arranged for a debate on Thursday, August 10 and Friday August 11. He also fixed another special cabinet meeting for August 11 to enable the ministers to express their views.

Opposition parties evaded expressing their views in parliament. At the cabinet meeting the opinion was divided. Thondaman, Athulathmudali Gamini Dissanayake, Ranjit Atapattu and Festus Perera—all senior ministers—took up the position that Sri Lanka should avoid a confrontation with India. New ministers took a harder line. Education Minister W. J. M. Lokubandara argued that Sri Lanka should insist on getting the IPKF out. He said Colombo should not yield to any of India's demands.

Thondaman cautioned against picking up a fight with India. He said that would harm Sri Lanka more than India. He also said Sri Lanka should take this opportunity to devolve more power to the provincial councils. "Let's make use of this opportunity to solve the ethnic problem", he said.

President Premadasa said he would take a decision after considering the views expressed in parliament and cabinet. President Premadasa then sent his advisor Bradman Weerakoon to Delhi to obtain clarifications. At the time of writing on August 30, no finality has been reached. But a war has been averted.

Thondaman's role in this incident will go down in history. He not only helped Sri Lanka to avoid a war but had also proved that compromise and skilful negotiation are a basic of his character. That has been his forte, the secret on his success; the tool he employed effectively to win deliverance to his people.

Since August 30, the date this chapter was handed to the printer details of Bradman Weerakoon's New Delhi mission have become known. He was sent by President Premadasa to resolve three sticky matters: date of the IPKF withdrawal; cessation of hostilities by the IPKF against the Tigers; and the composition of the Security Co-ordination Group.

Weerakoon went to negotiate an early withdrawal, earlier than India's stipulated February 1990; for a permanent ceasefire instead of India's offer of 15 days; and inclusion of the Governor of the North-East Province in the Security Co-ordination Group.

Weerakoon met the Foreign Ministry officials and finally Gandhi. The Indian Prime Minister agreed to accelerate the IPKF withdrawal and complete it by the end of December and acceded to Colombo's wish to reconstitute the Security Co-ordination Group. They agreed the group should be headed by Sri Lanka's Minister of State for Defence and comprise the Chief Minister of the North-East Province, Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary and the General Officer Commanding the IPKF.

With much reluctance Gandhi agreed to extend the ceasefire to one month with the promise that it would be extended if the Tigers behaved.

President Premadasa was not satisfied. He wanted a speedier IPKF withdrawal — preferably by the end of October; and the ceasefire to be permanent.

These points were finally resolved on September 6 when Ranjan Wijeratne met Gandhi at Belgrade, where both attended the Non-Aligned Movement summit. At that meeting, described as "friendly, cordial and co-operative", Gandhi agreed to a permanent ceasefire but wanted adequate safeguards built into the agreement. And it took ten days to chisel the mechanism for monitoring the ceasefire.

The final agreement was signed on September 18 in Colombo, by Lankan Foreign Secretary Bernard Tikaratne and Indian High Commissioner Lakhan Lal Mehrotra. The seven-paragraph joint communique released simultaneously, in Colombo and New Delhi stated that Sri Lanka undertook to expedite the devolution process, agreed to establish the Provincial Police Force

and facilitate the effective functioning of the North-East Provincial Council and establish an adequate administrative structure for that purpose, Colombo also undertook to institute early measures to strengthen the civil administration.

Sri Lanka also undertook to set up a Peace Committee to afford political and ethnic groups in the North-East Province to come together to settle their differences, thereby ending violence.

India on her part undertook to make all efforts to accelerate the IPKF withdrawal and complete it before December 31. It also agreed to suspend offensive military operations against the LTTE. It took effect at 6 a.m. on September 20.

An Observer group consisting of the Sri Lanka Army Commander and General Officer Commanding the IPKF was set up to report on violations and take immediate consequential action.

A Security Co-ordinating Group comprising Sri Lanka Minister of State for Defence, Chief Minister of the North-East Province, Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary and the General Officer Commanding the IPKF is to be set up to take measures to ensure safety and security in the North-East Province as the phased withdrawal of the IPKF goes through.

The agreement denotes the completion of the negotiation process which began with Thondaman's July 27 midnight dash to India House and then to the office of the Indian High Commission. That was a bold and great effort that saved Sri Lanka from a war.

