

## **Chapter Two: History of the Ethnic Crisis**

In the first chapter we have seen that the history of Sri Lanka is a complex tangle of shifting geographical boundaries, racial, religious and ethnic rivalries, colonialist collusion and hermeneutical imperialism. We have also seen that the seeds of symbiosis and peace continued to exist in this radically pluralistic ecology. Before those seeds can be brought more fruitfully to light, however, we must look more carefully at the history of the ethnic crisis, which we now turn to in this chapter.

### **Developments and Deterioration in the Colonial Period**

It is both significant and relevant to make an impartial evaluation of the achievements and failures, areas of progress and the setbacks Ceylon had experienced during the period of over 440 years in strong and close relationship with the European nations. Though it started as a bilateral relationship in trade, it soon became unilateral when the Europeans captured the different regions of the country. The Portuguese and the Dutch controlled the maritime provinces, while the British penetrated the hill region and therefore conquered the entire country. But all of them bartered and bargained in trade in the beginning but ended up in political control of the place. They all were of one accord in their conviction that political control was the pre-requisite for trade control. The internal political rivalry among the local monarchs unfolded to all of them the red carpet of welcome into the country. Having come and seen the goodness and riches in the island of paradise, they opted to stay in the "treasure island." Cinnamon, pepper, coffee, tea, cocoa, coconut, gems, and tusks, all of them and more enriched the colonizers and their nations. First, they traded them, later on they simply took them for cheap cost. The introduction and development of cash crops by them

made the local peasants to abandon the cultivation of food crop, the rice. Spices were important and useful for the natives, but they are only condiments in their food.

Therefore, the abandonment of rice or paddy cultivation resulted in the loss of self-sufficiency in subsistence. The only reason the coconut cultivation survived was that it served multipurposes, such as liqueur, vinegar, oil, ropes, wood, and cleanware. The abandonment of the production of the predominant food crop also resulted in the deterioration of the pristine hydraulic achievements – the great reservoirs were not only important for cultivation and irrigation but also to a healthy ecological balance. Now they had either dried or fallen into disuse, becoming breeding places for mosquitoes and other insects and viruses causing epidemics. This caused the displacement of the people into other towns and further destroyed those areas.

Therefore, on the whole, though the Island of Paradise made the colonizers rich, the children of the soil became poorer day by day. The only local people who thrived at this time were the middle-men who belonged to the regional nobility and aristocracy who connived and collaborated with the conquistadors in providing both the cheap labor force and the products. Be they Sinhalese or Tamils, they were the ones to exploit their own people both then and now. For as middle-men, they exploited then, and as powerful politicians or business magnates they exploit now.

Education and industry on the other hand developed quite considerably during this period. Lanka had always had her own system of education based on the oriental Gurukula or guru-sishya method. Both secular and religious education was imparted in this style. The Portuguese began the school system in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Schools were built adjacent to the churches and managed by the Vicar. This system continued and developed in the Dutch and British time successively. Teachers' training colleges were also set up by the missionaries or in the dioceses to recruit teachers in the school

of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction. It was, however, not uncommon that candidates to the training colleges were asked for their baptismal certificates as a pre-requisite to gain admission and jobs. The schools were considered “fishing ponds” or places to gain souls for Christ, they did form people of caliber to serve the society.

The Dutch made education compulsory not only to make the local people literate, but also to ensure conversion to Christianity. They set up commissions to periodically examine performance in the schools. They also set up training schools for teachers.

During the British period, there were government schools and private or church schools. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century even the other religions began erecting their own schools following the Christian example. The British government was criticized for being partial toward the schools set up by the Anglican missionaries in allocating funds and facilities. But on the whole, the religious schools were lauded for their better performance in comparison to the government schools.

The Portuguese also were famous for their catechesis through drama. Stories of the Bible and Christian virtues were translated into the traditional folk theatre method (Kuothu/Javanika) and were performed in the church premises. In some places, life-size puppets were made to reenact the Passion, Death, and Resurrection narratives annually. These practices are still in vogue in the maritime Sinhala and Tamil Catholic Churches, and they draw thousands of devotees and viewers from other religions. Philippus Baldeus, a Dutch missionary of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, speaks about theatres with in church premises.

Though one could speak of emergence and development in literary works in the native languages (Sinhala and Tamil), by and large both languages suffered deterioration. Portuguese, Dutch and English were the official languages in their

respective times. Many books and materials were composed in local languages and later even newspapers were edited in the same, but except for a few literary geni who both among the local people and some foreign missionaries, Sinhalese and Tamil languages suffered stunted growth. One could not rise to a high position if one was not conversant in the colonial languages. In order to survive and rise in those days almost all famous schools in the different towns had education in English medium till 1950. Only after this time and especially a decade after that, education in the mother tongue medium became the normal practice.

Civil administration, on the other hand, witnessed intensity and growth in the colonial times. Especially the Dutch first and then the British organized the civil society under definite rules and systems. Records of persons, assets, revenues, and events called “Tombos” and recorders or registrars called “Tombodor” provided accurate information to the administration. The law of the country which remained in place until 1972 was a system called the “Roman-Dutch Law.” To this day, the government offices and Secretariats are referred to in all three languages in their Portuguese and Dutch names: “Kacheri and Kantoor.” The judicial system too is a credit to its colonial introduction to the country.

Social services such as hospitals and orphanages owe credit to the Christian missionaries of all denominations. Urged by the Christian ideals of “the corporal works of mercy” and “Christian charity” they built hospitals and orphanages to look after the sick, orphans and elders in all the regions of their presence. This is not to deny that the Buddhists did not provide such services to the people. For example, both in Anuradhapura, Mihintale and Polonnaruwa there are the archeological ruins of hospitals and “medicinal bath boats” belonging to the Buddhist monasteries of the early and medieval ages. The Christian hospitals were taken over by the government in

1960. Yet the older folks of the country have reminiscence about the committed care of the “Christian Sisters” who nursed them with love in the hospitals.

One sphere that does not stand to the credit of the colonial times most unfortunately is the attitude of the Christians toward other religions. The missionaries’ zeal for conversion was based on the fundamentalist conviction “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,” and that the members of the other faiths were heathens or devil’s devotees. They were considered to be uncivilized and groping in spiritual darkness. Conversions were sometimes made peacefully and sometimes by force. What was most unfortunate was that those who lived during the transfer of power from one colonizer to the next, were even forced to change their denomination. Though this was no problem for the opportunists, it did cause problems, sadness and even resulted in the deaths of more earnest individuals.

Sometimes they destroyed Buddhist and Hindu temples and their sacred places of pilgrimage and were hostile to Muslims and Buddhist monks. By promoting the idea that Christianity is a western religion, the converts were encouraged to adopt their lifestyle according to that of the colonizer. The repression and persecution of the Christians by the Tamil king Sankili of Jaffna in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is a logical reaction to the Christianization which ultimately lead to Europeanization, more popularly known as Westernization.

As mentioned earlier, the bourgeoisie and elites who converted to Christianity to win the favors of the conquistadors had no problem in reverting back to their traditional religions after the independence from colonial power. It is also they who, when they assumed power, initiated the process of de-Christianization under the popular name de-Westernization. But the arrogant attitude of the colonizers cannot be condoned or legitimized in light of the unwise attitude of the post independent

governments in throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The Buddhists and Hindus of Ceylon-Sri Lanka still carry with them their grievances of the arrogance of the Christian colonizers.

The unification of the nation and administrations was a very important development at this point. As a result of this attempt, the whole country became a network, or, in modern parlance, “a web,” with Colombo, the new British capital, as its center. The entire country was divided into 9 provinces administered by the new breed of Disavvas now named as government agent, a chief executive to represent the governor. Such unification paved the way for administrative and social progress. Communication, transportation, education, sanitation and other infrastructures were quickly established. Thus the stagnation based on ethnic-geopolitical circles was torn wide open quite suddenly without much consideration for its long-standing culture, and the changes in Sri Lanka, I say, can be evaluated in terms of positivity and negativity. Often it is difficult to see where one fades into or out of the other. Perhaps it is so because of the complexity of situations in which they came into being. One thing is certain, if Sri Lanka today, like so many other countries of the two-thirds of the world, is still “on the road” to development, it is because of the European colonizers and not by her own choice.

Sri Lanka is and has been a historically diverse island with various types, classes, races, religions, and groups of people, as numerous ethnographies and travel narratives from ancient to modern times have remarked. Amidst this diversity at different times, groups of Tamils have been and are both the enemies and affines (marriage partners) of the Sinhalese. Yet native and foreign orientalist and nationalists fixated on categorical identity formations, and what they perceive as the conservatism of the East, have tended to posit that the strength of the internally diverse nation states of the Indian sub-continent wax and wane inversely to their ethnic and religious constituencies, and are finally subordinate to them. Sri Lanka is and has been no exception to this trend. Thus Sinhala and Tamil identities have been read far back into the island’s antiquity to posit the mutually exclusive nature of their cultures. In these accounts, Sri Lanka has always been and is destined to always be an ethnic-based nation with

ethnicity as a constant and unchanging factor. In the face of such simplistic yet compelling narratives of the island's past it is salutary to remember that ethnic identity, an abstraction, is often subsumed and cross-sectioned by other sectarian alliance and identity makers.

In post-colonial Sri Lanka, Sinhala Buddhists and Tamils have emerged as antagonists within the modern nation. The process that led to this confrontation might seem to have commenced in the latter part of the British colonial classification, administration and centralization of the island, but reached fruition in the violent decades of the 80s and 90s. Modern instruments such as the census, maps and history itself have contributed to it.

To prove the point that distinct communities, with different cultures and administrative sovereignty there are two documents belonging to the 18<sup>th</sup> century written by two British officers to the crown of England.

Two different nations from a very ancient period have divided between them the possession of the island. First, the Sinhalese, inhabiting the interior of the country, in its southern and western parts, and secondly the Malabars who possess the Northern and Eastern districts. These two nations differ entirely in their religion, language and manners.”

I think it may be safe to conclude both from them and from the histories I have in my possession that the race of people who inhabited the whole of northern and Eastern provinces of the island of Ceylon, at the period of their greatest agricultural prosperity, spoke the same language, used the same written characters and had the same origin, religion, castes, laws and manners as that race who at the same period inhabited the southern peninsula of India...

### **Post-colonial Contentions**

Agitations and demands for freedom from colonial rule came from all parts and all races of the country. No one wanted to be under the rule of an alien. The powerful concept of Mahatma Gandhi - “Swa raj,” self-rule, echoed even in the neighboring country. As we have seen in the first chapter, the British very tactfully began the process of granting independence in stages from the early decades of the 1900s. Though legislative councils of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had local racial representatives, they were “unofficial members” and could only make suggestions and observations without the assurance of being heard. Only in the state council that was formed by election

after the adult franchisement in 1929 did the local people have any voice.

At this point, a new situation began to emerge in the ensuing years, namely, the quantitative and proportionate representation of the ethnic population of the country. In a sense, I believe that the British commission was naïve in presupposing that the local people should think in terms of the whole country rather than the races or ethnicities. At the same time, I am also of the firm opinion that the members of the various ethnic groups themselves entertained clear tendencies of racial or ethnic fundamentalism vis-a-vi racial harmony and symbiosis. As Ponnambalam remarks:

A wedge was driven into the structure of Sinhalese-Tamil political unity by the colonial government's concession of constitutional reform in 1920. It introduced territorially elected representatives and enlarged the legislative council to 23 members with an unofficial majority. This made the Sinhales think in terms of their numerical strength and ipso facto greater representation and the need to appeal to their own constituencies and electors.

Though this attitude of proportional representation and ratio basis was natural and inevitable, they soon became the only and all-pervasive criterion in the entire socio-political and economic area of the country, and later found its way even into other spheres of national life.

The British welded the island into a cohesive whole through the network of communications which they developed and through their unified administrative structure. Their educational system also contributed to the emergence of a English-educated westernized middle class comprising members of the administration, personnel in the commercial establishments from clerical hands upwards, professional men such as lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists, and landed proprietors owning mostly coconut and some rubber lands. Quite a few of these people went to the metropolitan country for studies or to British-oriented schools in the island which among other things imparted knowledge of British constitutional history and parliamentary institutions.

With time, the "England returneds" and the local intelligentsia desired similar institutions in their country. They also wanted the administration progressively Ceylonised – the obvious result of increasing education and specialization.

## **The Political Party System**

The elite of Sri Lanka was suddenly faced with the arduous task of hurriedly forming political parties before the parliamentary election in 1947. The party system did not exist in the country previously and was absolutely foreign to it. Those of the Tamil and Sinhale elites who had the fortune of foreign education especially in England wished to adopt the same system here too. The British too were happy that their subjects were willing to adopt their system. As it worked well in their country, they expected it to work well universally too. They had transformed the social and economic system of the country in their own image and were satisfied that now politically Sri Lanka would follow suit. The following are some of the significant political parties that emerged before the first election in 1947.

The United National Party, under the leadership of Mr. Don Stephen Senanayake, was formed in 1946. Muslim, Ceylon Tamil and Indian Tamils too expressed their willingness to support this party. In its policies, it resembled and was a Sri Lankan version of the Conservative Party of England. It was anti-Marxist and openly pro-West, favoring the private sector. It is to this party that power was transferred after independence. In the first leader of this party the British found a dependable ally. This party has governed the country six times since independence. Though there have been changes in the policies, e.g. from capitalism to a socialist tendency, at its core it favors the rise of the private sector economy.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party was formed in September 1951 by Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike who broke from the United National Party. The political and economic policy of this party was more nationalist than foreign. Buddhism and Sinhala was considered priority in their policies and strategies. This

party wished to see the end of British policies. The SLFP is more socialist than capitalist and favored the rise and growth of the public sector. This party has governed the country 5 times. The leadership of this party is heavily vested in the Bandaranaike family from its inception.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party and its break away from the Communist Party were formed in December 1935 and July 1943 respectively. These are both Marxist and Leninist in ideology. These two parties have organized many strikes in the beginning in favor of workers rights. They have never been powerful enough to form governments, but have formed coalitions with the majority parties either to build the government or the opposition.

The Federal Party was formed in 1949 as the political voice of the Tamils in the nation. As the name suggests, its purpose was to form an ethnically based federal government for the Tamil population within the nation under the central government. This party had staged non-violent sit-ins called Satyagraha. In the future, this party has striven strategically for the citizenship, welfare and development of the Indian Community now renamed Malayaha Tamil Community. This party joins both major political parties, if they promise to deliver their requests.

### **New Political Parties**

The Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) which was a Sinhala revolutionary and militant movement which was a Sinhala revolutionary and militant movement staged an anti-state revolution in 1971 and 1989 which were crushed by the government of those times (SLFP and UNP respectively). From the 1990s it has become a political party. Its ideology is inspired by Marxist and feminist doctrines.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress began in 1994 to give political status to the Muslim communities of the country. Though this party forms a coalition with any party that fulfills its requests, the ultimate goal of this party is to have a Muslim federal region in the country.

Political Wings of Tamil Militant Movement. The Tamil liberation militant movements such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Eelam's People's revolutionary Liberation Front, Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization which began in 1977, staged anti-government armed revolution intermittently. All these movements except the LTTE have now attained "quasi political status." The LTTE too began its political wing in 1989 after a pact in 1990 resulted in the government prescribing the movement as a terrorist organization. The LTTE is now a strictly militant organization.

Within these five decades after independence, the political party system has witnessed amoebic growth in Sri Lankan politics. Many parties have mushroomed in this period. In the last (11<sup>th</sup>) parliamentary elections that were held in October 2000, over 25 registered political parties vied for constituencies while in 1970 there were only 10 political parties. The political candidates have diverse professional backgrounds such as academicians, businessmen, educators, film actors, lawyers, land owners, gross marketeers, shop-keepers, school teachers and sons or wives of politicians, doctors, native physicians and professional politicians. In the last elections, the large number of contestants striving to enter the parliament made all people - intellectuals or not - wonder whether politics, being over and above the most prestigious and powerful profession, had also become the most lucrative profession in the country.

### **Causes of the Origin of the Modern Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka**

When Sri Lanka consisted of different kingdoms which were ethnically or clan based, confined to well-defined territorial peripheries, the representation problem did not arise. If it did, it was within the subdivisions of the same society. But as we have seen earlier, the nullification of the territorial kingdoms, Wanniates and Vassalages, and the unification of the entire country under a central legislative administration in 1815 brought about ethnic rebellion against the British controlled government in the different regions. This rebellion took a different form or transformed into inter-ethnic conflict, when the power of national administration was handed over to the state council in 1931. The cause of this new form of conflict was triggered by the number of seats allocated to the representatives of the various ethno-cultural components of the then current society of the country. This obviously became the biggest issue in a system that decides matters by the show of hands or votes. The local elite, who got into the “power house” of the nation under the patronage of the British benevolence, suddenly found themselves as either having enough or not enough allies to support their opinions and agendas. Thus naturally they were bent on increasing the hands on their side and decreasing the same on the other side. As Tambiah suggests:

In due course, the British raj spawned its own antithesis in the form of a revival of Buddhism among the newly emerging elite, especially in the low country of the southwest, a pressure for a greater participation in governing the country, and a drive for a restoration and revival of traditional national culture. All these developments culminated and erupted like a volcano in 1956....One was the collision between the old English-educated liberal elite, more or less committed to a “secular” politics uncontaminated by religious considerations, and to the British conventions, and the newly arisen elite of largely Sinhala-educated and purveyors of small commerce, committed to a Buddhist-Sinhala identity. It is the second group that won in 1956 under the leadership of Bandaranaike.

The Sinhala society right from the early years of the post-independence era had two major political parties, the UNP and the SLFP, which were also the principal contenders for political power, and a few minor parties. Both the Sri Lankan Tamils

and the Indian Tamils had their own party, the Federal Party and the Ceylon Workers Congress respectively. The Muslims and Burgers joined themselves in the aforementioned political parties either according to their convictions or convenience. It should be noted that at this point the two major Sinhala political parties also had small numbers of candidates and supporters from the other three ethnic communities. In the past colonial era, as time rolled on the political sense of proportional representation and the ethno-religious identity became so sensitized, that they both grew so gigantic that they soon overshadowed every sphere of national life. From politics to professional life, from the economy to education, from revenue to religion, in all these *sitz im leben*, one could hear the repeated refrain: “the legitimacy and urgency of proportionate representation.” Hence in order to address to this never-ceasing cry, existing district peripheries were lengthened or shortened, electoral territories were enlarged or redrawn or even split into further divisions after 1956. Darini Rajasingham describes this process in this way:

History seems to repeat itself but not as the nationalists tell it. For the reordering of internal political boundaries in the island of Sri Lanka that many of the borders shifted with the name and perspective is not new. What is new is that if new border rents the territorial and geographic unity and sovereignty of the island of Sri Lanka, it is a fiction of unity constructed by (post) colonial administrators, ethnic nationalists and scholars since early this century. For a while now, we have been told that Sinhals and Tamils fought each other from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century onwards. There is no space and worse, Sinhala communities were brought from the Sinhala Villages from the southwest to colonize some of the Tamil areas. The Kent Farm and Dollar Farm in the north, Vavuniya in the north central region, Somapura, Seruwila and Digavapiya in the east are standing examples of such systematic colonization or transplantation of the

Sinhala communities in the traditional Tamil areas. The grievance, however, for me is not the actual colonization of the Sinhala citizens in the Tamil areas. I am of the opinion that within the nation any one of any ethnic background should have the right and freedom to live and move. It is therefore not the fact that is questionable, but the very purpose and motive of the colonization that caused the conflict among the traditional residents and the new arrivals in the ensuing years. These so-called “colonies” created by the government for the internal immigration, were also fostered and facilitated for habitation, e.g. houses were built, wells sunk, electricity supplied, schools, hospitals and temples built and other social, administrative infrastructures were built to make life fairly easy, safe and to facilitate communication with the rest of the country. In fact, some of these new colonies had more facilities than even some of the old villages of these areas which had human habitation for centuries.

Encroachment of land became another problem in these areas. Except in the coastal areas where the colonized Sinhala folks would go off shore or deep sea fishing, in all the interior own community. Hence, the Tamils of the area felt not only robbed of their traditional territories but also found themselves facing the danger of being ousted from the place where they built up their livelihood. The fear of the Tamil population living in the border territories and adjacent to the new Sinhala colonies was very vividly expressed by the Secretary General A. Amirthalingam of the Tamil United Liberation

Front:

Ever since independence we have been agitating for a federal form of government so that we may within the orbit of a federal union manage our affairs. Successive Sinhalese governments came to agreements with us with regard to various forms of regional autonomy and decentralization but never implemented those promises. On top of it a virtual array of occupations was planted in the Tamil areas and harassment by this army became so intolerable that in 1976 we took the decision that we had no alternative but to assert our right of self-determination and establish a sovereign state of our own which

historically we were entitled to.

The first ever Sinhala-Tamil conflict of this country began in 1958. I dare to accentuate the phrases alluded to from classics and pristine documents, do not fit in to the definition of the word “ethnic.” The word “ethnic” and “race” cannot contain all those socio-political nuances and awareness and connotations that grew up only in the later middle ages with the arrival of European Colonialism. Identification of Sinhalese and Tamils, Buddhist and Hindu in the pre-medieval Lanka was not loaded, in my opinion, with all such post medieval and modern sociopolitical connotations. The passing of the “Sinhala only” act in the parliament by the then prime minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, and the reaction of the Tamils against it irrupted into an island-wide conflict that caused the loss of thousands of precious lives and valuable properties of the Tamils living in Sinhala areas. Father Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan theologian and sociologist, writes:

This was followed in 1958 by the worst communal violence that the country had seen up to then in modern history. 50,000 Tamils were chased away from the south due to the violence of the mob against them. In this situation the government was inactive for some days. Here too there was a situation of the violence of the mob, the relative passivity of the police and the armed forces, at least for a few days in some areas. The vast majority of the Sinhala people did not want violence. The Tamil people were not violent except in a few places.

At this time many well to do Tamils left Sri Lanka due to their insecurity. Young Tamil children were deeply shocked by this violence. Prabakaran the Tamil LTTE leader (a boy at that time) mentions how he witnessed the violence against his own family. This is a better memory in the Tamil Community and it lead to a profound distrust of the majority community and a determination to struggle for their security.

The Sinhala Only act passed in the parliament had another side to it—the acceptance of Buddhism as the only state religion. The majority of the Buddhist Sanga and many of the pirivenas or nikayas supported the Bandaranaike ideology of Sinhala Buddhism as the legitimacy of Sri Lankanness.

The Indian Tamil Plantation workers were systematically stripped of voting rights and were made stateless from 1948 to 1964 by the UNP and SLFP governments. The presence of Indian Tamils being 11-7% of the total population, with the Sri Lankan Tamil population of 11%, according to the 1946 Census, must have caused alarm among the major political parties. As Wilson, a Sri Lankan political scientist explains:

Even though the Tamil people who inhabit Sri Lanka are a minority in Sri Lanka, if they are regarded together with the Tamil people who live in South India near the northern boundary of Sri Lanka, the Tamil people appear as the majority and the Sinhalese people of the minority also when one contemplates the History of Sri Lanka, that history is full of battles between the two sections – Lesslie Gunawardene – Minister of Communications.

Nearly one million of the plantation workers were not able to obtain citizenship until 1964. An agreement was made between the then prime ministers of the two countries Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Lal Bahadur Shastri that 525,000 would be repatriated to India and 300,000 would be given citizenship in Sri Lanka, both within a period of 15 years and the fate of the rest will be decided later by both governments.

After the murder of Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1959, his widow Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike succeeded as prime minister for the rest of the period and her party SLFP won the election again for the next five years from 1961. It was during her tenure in office that the schools were nationalized and Indian workers were repatriated, and the first insurrection of the rural Sinhala Youth (Che Guevara movement) took place. The promulgation of the country as Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka and the systematic constitutionalization of anti-Tamil agendas such as compulsory Sinhala for job promotion, decrease of job quotas, harassment of the Tamil in public offices and police stations, colonization of Sinhala folks in Tamil areas and above all, the failure of political pacts and non-violent protest, resulted in the

earlier said Vattukkottai Resolution of a Separate Tamil State in 1976. In the election of 1977, the TULF posited this as its manifesto and the people returned nearly all of them to the parliament giving the mandate to work toward its realization. But immediately after the elections the UNP which formed the government a large-scale violence erupted against the Tamils in the southwest. With the connivance of the state police and military machine, Tamils were massacred or mutilated and their assets and properties were looted. It was at this time that the UNP prime minister JR Jayawardene stated, "If it is peace, it is peace; if it is war, it is war." The reaction of the Sinhala civilians ranged from connivance with the thugs, protecting the Tamils in their houses, and merely looking on helplessly.

### **The 1983 Ethnic Riot**

The UNP party which came into power extended its lifetime in parliamentary power for a further period of 7 years, up to 1989, through a well-crafted referendum. The 1979 "Prevention of Terrorism" act proscribed the 3-year-old but vigorous Tamil militant movements and drove them underground. Thousands of innocent Tamil youth were arrested, tortured, and mercilessly eliminated under this terror act of "Prevention of the presence of 300 specially picked police officers and two government ministers.

In 1983 the army personnel stationed in Jaffna abducted 3 young girls and gang-raped them. The LTTE retaliated this by killing 13 soldiers. This kindled the fire of violence against the Tamils living in Colombo and in the suburbs. Hundreds of Tamils were brutally murdered and burnt in their homes and on the roads, and their houses were looted and burnt by groups of thugs. In spite of the 24 hour curfew, the looting and murder went on. Those who were fortunate ran safe into refugee camps in

schools, churches, and Hindu temples (about 125,000), others succumbed to torture and death on their way. This violence spread to the other provinces such as the central, north central Sabaragamuwa and Uva provinces. All the Tamils living in these areas were displaced and suffered damages. The thugs acted as if they were on drugs, enjoying their deeds of violence, murder, torture and rape. The foreign tourists staying in the five-star hotels of Colombo witnessed with awe and dismay the spree of such beastly violence and photographed or videographed them and publicized them in their countries. That is how, thanks to them, the whole world came to know about the miserable plight of the minority Tamils of Sri Lanka. There are stories of how some of the thugs even posed for photographs in the middle of their pillaging. The violence lasted over a month.

The following account is by a Sinhala author who laments the atrocities against innocents, business, and children were taken to or went to school. They noticed that some shops were closed, but thought that that was a precaution in view of the morning's newspaper item. At about 10 am, they suddenly became aware that a program had begun: organized actions against Tamils in the streets and in buildings, and against Tamil establishments were being taken by squads which had taken up their position and armed themselves with hit-lists and weapons throughout Colombo and in the suburban cities... There were a large number of eye witnesses of what happened. They watched with disbelief and amazement as the police and the government made no attempt to stop or hinder small gangs of men who went about with lists, burning the houses and flats (in the Sinhala-owned dwellings only the things), grocery stores, pharmacies, textile shops tailoring establishments, restaurants, bookshops, hardware shops, lawyers offices, studios, etc. patronized regularly by tens of thousands of Sri Lankans as well as tourist hotels. They also burnt trucks, vans, and cars. They did this expertly, as early reports stated, within the sight of the president's house...a few yards from the Prime Minister's official residence...taking care on a hot dry morning not to start fires which would spread to adjoining Sinhala-owned or state property...*In Kelaniya, Industries minister Cyril Matthew's gangs were identified as the ones at work. The general secretary of government union, the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS) was identified as the leader of the gangs that wrought destruction and death all over Colombo and specially in WellaWatta where as many as 10 houses per street were destroyed. A particular UNP municipal counselor of Dehiwala – Mount Lavinia led gangs in Mount Lavinia. In the Pettah Bazaar area, where 442 shops were destroyed and*

*murders committed, the commander was the son of Aloysius Mudalali, the Prime Minister's right-hand man.* The thugs who worked regularly for the UNP, both ministers of state and Party headquarters, and in some cases uniformed military personnel and police were seen leading the attack. They used vehicles from the Sri Lanka Transport Board (Minister in charge, M.H. Mohammed) and other government departments and state corporations... One of the biggest exploits of the heroes was the massacre that day in Welikade prison of 35 people, including some convicted men and most either on remand or arbitrarily detained by the military. All were SL Tamils. We are convinced that this massacre could not have been carried out without gover hit list. Army action had resulted in over 60% of Badulla's center being reduced to rubble. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, incredibly the 2<sup>nd</sup> massacre of Tamil political detainees and remand prisoners was successfully carried out. This time 18 were killed. There was more to come. *J.R. Jayawardene publicly spoke for the first time on Thursday evening, justifying what had been done to the Tamils in South and Central Sri Lanka, and uttering not a word of sympathy.* On Friday, this provocative speech and other actions led to further arson and many more killings.”

On the 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of July, 53 Tamil political prisoners, mostly members of the Tamil Liberation movements, were killed by the Sinhala inmates of the same prison in the presence of prison officials. In the words of Tambiah:

“The holocaust of July 1983, called by some an anti-Tamil program, is a major turning point in the history of Tamil people in Sri Lanka and worldwide. The unity among themselves which the Tamils could not achieve was brought about by the fury and scale of the violence against them by the Sinhala mob, backed by the indifference (if not a lack of discipline) of the security forces and the scandalous silence and inaction of the government. If many had earlier doubted the wisdom of the demand for Eelam, now almost every Tamil felt, deep down inside that there was a strong case for a separate area for Tamils in Sri Lanka.”

“But when shops and houses are burnt in Tricomalee, when soldiers rape Tamil girls, burn down shops and libraries, and mow down innocent civilians in the Bazaars of northern towns; when school girls taking examinations are forcibly taken to police stations in Batticloa; when in Upcountry Indian Coolies are mercilessly beaten and driven from their miserable coolies lines into pitiful refugee camps; when all these events happen simultaneously as action taken against the “Tamils,” then it is inevitable that Tamils of all varieties will see themselves as sharing a common condition, and as victims of a blanket violence on the part of the majority community. The Tamils too are on their way to becoming a single political collectivity, proclaiming themselves to be a distinct nationality with rights of self-determination and entitled to their homelands, and perhaps more than any other factor in recent history, the repeated discrimination and aggressive acts of Sinhalese will have produced the result. As things are now, this may be

a fortunate circumstance for the Tamils, a serendipitous and unanticipated aid to their future negotiation.

Gangsterism and mob violence have become in this country the private brigades of the politicians in power. Such people or mercenaries are employed and patronized by them not only to form a tight security ring for their safety, but also to carry out their agendas of forcing people to attend their meetings and celebrations, to beat, punish or eliminate rivals and opponents and even to rob polling or voting cards from voters. These thugs and chandiyas (strong men or bullies) who are members of the underworld of the armed forces – are not mere chandiyas (strong men) who used to roam urban proletarian neighborhoods. They represent entirely new networks and structures of political patronage, capital accumulation, and means of coercion and representation. They have access to modern weapons and the state is aware of it, yet they are not disarmed, although their actions run parallel to those of the formal and conventional institutions of state power. That is precisely how they define themselves as subterranean agents of certain components of the State that are born and exist UG (underground). They also define the changing sociology of political power in Sri Lanka... This way of looking at the phenomenon of political gangsterism raises some uncomfortable yet real questions about the political process in our country. If there are underground coercive structures of power operating in society, and if they are autonomous from formal structures of state power, what is, and who are the State? As some newspapers have recently suggested the gangsters are politically protected and the law enforcement agencies are mere onlookers of gangster crimes. Then what is the state of the State in Sri Lanka?

‘Criminalization of politics’ – it is perhaps too early to use this formulation to describe the existing relationship between the worlds of crime and politics, but all signs are that before long we may well find these two words extremely evocative in describing events.”

The 1983 riots earned a profound sympathy to the Sri Lankan Tamils all over the world and was an anti-campaign for the Sinhala government of Sri Lanka. Both England and Canada and a few other European countries and India naturally opened their frontiers and took in thousands of refugees and asylum seekers. Many countries and foreign media and journalists vividly portrayed the 1983 anti-Tamil atrocities and condemned the government for its culpability. It took a long time for the Sri Lanka UNP government to get the blame and shame off its back. Many Sinhalese citizens and leaders felt badly about the irresponsible and brutal behavior of the thugs, police

and forces of their own race. While thousands of Sinhalese neighbors harbored and protected their Tamil friends, some of them even condemned such inhuman atrocities by publicly voicing their opinion. For want of space, I think it is sufficient to quote just one statement of a Sinhala Church leader I respect very much, and with whom, later I had the honor to be a colleague. “Speaking as a Christian, I feel that my hands are stained with blood of innocent Tamil people; I didn’t do any of the killing, but you will find in the Christian teaching the idea of solidarity, the idea of corporate responsibility. I am a Sinhala person and Sinhala people are killing Tamils so it is as if my own hounds are stained with the blood of these victims. Therefore, I ask my Tamil brothers and sisters to forgive us for what we have done as Sinhalese people.”

### **Communal Conflicts after the Ethnic Riot**

For about 5 years after the 1983 racial riots, the country was comparatively quiet. No widespread violence took place in the country. Yet there were unfortunate and condemnable incidents that marred the peaceful atmosphere in the North Central and Eastern provinces. In 1985, a Muslim-Tamil communal violence sporadically happened in the village of Karaitievu in the Eastern province. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April the Tamil population of this village like all others of the same race were intensely involved in their preparation for the religious and cultural New Year Festival on the following day. Suddenly around 1:30 pm a large band of Muslims came with guns swords, chains and clubs shouting “Allahu Akbar”, God is great, and destroyed the village burning the houses looting properties beating and shooting the people. Within hours over 500 houses were damaged and people of the village were homeless and flocked to ad hoc refugee camps formed in schools in the village. It was a Jihad of the neighboring Muslim village against the Tamils of Karaitievu. The usual border

skirmishes, quarrels, and litigation that took place between the members of these two communities for a few years culminated in this well-planned yet sporadic attack. What is noteworthy here is that the guns used by the Muslims were provided by the state police, on the recommendation of the Muslim politicians and their powerful members. This succinct narrative of this incident demonstrates that the government is ever willing to help those who have plans of anti-Tamil projects. The border skirmishes between the two communities could have been settled by negotiations initiated and sponsored by the government, instead of providing arms to one party only. The rationale behind this act was that if the Tamil militants were armed and protecting the Tamils, the state should furnish the Muslims with guns too. But those guns were pointed not at the militants but only at the civilians. This incident at Karaitheivu made public for the first time the pretence of a Muslim militant group called “Al Jihad.”

On the fourth of August 1990, in a Muslim town called Kattankudi 95 Muslim devotees worshiping in three mosques during high prayers were inhumanely murdered and a number of others were wounded. The LTTE was accused of the dastardly massacre. The LTTE denied responsibility of the incident and accused the government of being culpable of this sacrilegious mass murder. The foreign media quoted the assassins as “gunmen suspected to be Tigers and uniformed gunmen.” Despite the identity of those responsible, the act alone is both inhuman and evil, it cannot be legitimized under any rationale. Two sectors accused each other as culpable of this act viz the government and the Tigers. To this day the truth is yet to see light. But as usual, this triggered a Tamil-Tamil riot in the Eastern province, causing death and damage to innocent Tamil civilians.

In the year 1985 the volcano of revolution exploded in southwestern regions of the country. It began in 1971. As mentioned earlier, this attempt of 1971 was

ruthlessly stifled in the bud at the cost of 10,000 lives, by the Mrs. Bandaranaike government. With the arrest of its leader Rohana Wijeweera, the whole movement went underground and emerged as a political party, when he was released in 1977 by UNP government led by JR Jayawardene.

In May 1985, the LTTE killed about 150 civilians consisting of men, women, and children who were mostly pilgrims who were the Shrine and vicinity of the sacred Bo Tree in Anuradhapura. This tree apparently the oldest as it is believed to be an offshoot of the original Bo tree under which the Lord Buddha attained enlightenment about 2500 years ago. This is one of the most famous and venerated shrine for the Buddhists. The bullet marks on the tree made the Sinhala Buddhists both angry and sad. The LTTE had committed this unfortunate crime in retaliation to the killing of 70 civilians in the home town of the LTTE leader, by the Sri Lankan army. According to the high ranking Christian administrative officer Dissanayake, who visited the shrine after the incident:

The scene in Anuradhapura was one of shock, grief and anger. During 450 years of European Rule the Sri Maha Bodhiya was never desecrated. Now it bore marks of machine gun fire and the iron railings to protect it were partially destroyed by the grenade attack. Two pilgrims who were worshipping there were killed in the fuselage and another succumbed to injuries in the hospital. The Buddhists were truly enraged and the sacrilege was too much even for a non-Buddhist.

Though this is outside the chronological framework, may I be permitted to add just a quick note to an incident that took place in Kandy. On the immediate days of preparation of the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence, the LTTE attacked the Temple of the Tooth relic of Buddha, the most sacred shrine of the Buddhists, and damaged the façade of the Temple. This unfortunate and unstrategic act of sacrilege also both saddened and enraged the Buddhists and caused a day-long riot against Tamils and Hindu Temples in the town, which was quickly quenched. The

Buddha's adage that "violence begets violence" is proved beyond doubt in the modern political history of the country.

The unsuccessful attempt for the Presidency (the executive prime minister system was changed to Executive Presidency in 1978), the shrewd postponement of elections for further seven years and genuine frustrations of the rural Sinhala poor workers class, made the People's Liberation Front (JVP) resume arms again in 1985.

This

Premada (UNP) launched major offenses against JVP, an elimination attack, after having failed to make them agree to have political dialogue. The offensive operation consisted of ruthless assassination of those suspected of belonging to or supportive of the JVP. When JVP gave birth to a more violent offshoot called Deshapremiya Janatha Viyapara DJV or Lovers of the nation, which went on killing members of parliament, the army, police and ministers, the government gave birth to an equally violent terror force called Kola Kotiyo, or Green Tigers, who balanced the operation of the DJV by eliminating JVP members and supporters. In those days, burnt or charred bodies could be seen on the road sides in the shrubs or floating down the rivers. Youngsters were hacked or clubbed to death. Many of them were beheaded or their heads burnt. The more the government members or supporters murdered, the more ruthless the armed forces and the green tigers grew toward JVP and DJV. All schools in the southwestern regions were closed for six months. The JVP leader, Wijeweera, and its important members living incognito in a village called Ulapane in the central province were ambushed, arrested and murdered. With that the JVP insurrection came to a close in the first quarter of 1990.

### **The Indo-Sri Lankan Accord**

The fore said JVP insurrection which initiated many problems and damages to government persons and properties. The state military and law enforcement could not adequately deal with subjugating JVP attacks. At that time a large number of Army and police cadres were stationed in the northeastern provinces of the country, i.e. the predominantly Tamil areas, as the Tamil militants were also very strong and active, causing deaths and damages to government personnel and properties by the frequent guerilla attacks. President Jayawardane wanted to concentrate the attacks on the JVP by transporting the armed forces entirely to the south. Hence, in spite of the unwillingness of many of his party members, he invited the Indian Army to guard the northeastern region, in order that he might make full use of the Sri Lankan troops to subdue the Sinhala Insurrection. President Jayawardane even spoke out in anger against those of his own party who were against the Indo- Sri Lankan accord saying that he would get the help he needed even from the devil if necessary. Therefore an accord was signed between the President of Sri Lanka and prime minister of India Rajiv Gandhi on the 29<sup>th</sup> July 1987 in which among other things the principle cause was that IPKF would guard the north and east and force LTTE to surrender their arms.

Most of the ministers, politicians and the Sinhala populace were opposed to this accord and there were riots and rebellion in many parts of the island. The accord was signed in the midst of curfew and while the city of Colombo was on fire. The accord called for India to disarm LTTE and to help the Sri Lankan government attain peace in the north and east and Sri Lanka would not do anything to make the region insecure for Indian interests, especially not negotiate with any regional or global superpowers.

India was not at all keen on solving the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka or in helping the Sri Lankan Tamils to obtain the separate sovereign State. For that would have

boomeranged into bigger problems in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south, and Kashmir and Punjab in the north. Hence, India's intention was both to keep the Tamil conflict low-burning and to coax the SL government to follow the Indian political system. In the words of the Carnegie Commission:

Outsiders may exacerbate internal conflicts. Neighbors often become involved because of fear of spillover effects (e.g. outflow of refugees or soldiers regrouping), pressure from domestic constituencies, perceived economic interests, or threats to their citizens abroad. Insurgents are able sometimes to entice foreign interventions by appeal to religious and ethnic solidarity or by using local resources to pay for foreign mercenaries. Interventions can range from supplying weapons and support to direct participation with organized military sources.

An Indian political analyst Sankaran Krishna, a professor at the university of Hawaii, Honolulu appraises the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987 in the following words:

It was this game of covertly aiding and abetting the Tamil Militants while overtly putting diplomatic pressure on Jayawardane through the parleys with G Parthasarathy that characterized Indian policy toward Sri Lanka after July 1983. The latter's diplomatic efforts essentially aimed at getting Sri Lanka to recognize itself as a pluralist, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society in which the Tamils had an equal status. The aim was to re-make Sri Lanka along the lines of Indian polity with a relatively higher degree of state or provincial autonomy and to move it away from its then-unitary constitution. This aspect of Indian policy arose directly from the twin legacy of Indian regional policy mentioned at the outset of this essay, namely Indian self-perceptions as the regional hegemony and as the exemplar of a superior variety of pluralist nationalism in the region.

The day after the accord the Indian Peace Keeping force (IPKF) consisting of 500 troops landed in Sri Lanka followed by hundreds and thousands periodically. The surrendering of arms became a Token rather than a reality. The project that was to be completed in months dragged on for two years. There were at one point about 100,000 Indian soldiers and India was spending 20 crores of Rupees (200 million)

daily to maintain the IPKF contingent in Sri Lanka. Neither the merging of the northeastern provinces nor the disarmament of the LTTE and the arrest of its leader take place. Meanwhile, the IPKF atrocities toward the civilians became copious and beyond bearable. It was dubbed the “Innocent People Killing force” by Sri Lankans. It was in this period of terror that my 10-year-old daughter, Florence Regis Rammya was knocked down by a recklessly driven IPKF military truck, killing her instantly while she was returning home from Sunday worship on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1989. She was riding her bicycle well within her lane on the road, but the driver of this heavy war vehicle took to the very edge of the road and knocked her down. An innocent and peace-loving dove laid dead on the road in a pool of blood like her tender head that was crushed, the hearts of her parents and brothers also shattered for the rest of their lives. She was the last civilian victim of this utterly futile accord, which not only failed to deliver the proposed result both to India and Sri Lanka, but also triggered greater political problems for both countries in the future.

### **The Precarious End of a Political Romance**

In January of 1989, Ranasinghe Premadasa of the UNP was elected president and he was keen to oust IPKF from Sri Lanka. From day one, he was totally against the Indo-Lanka accord. He was successful in bringing an end to the JVP second insurrection within months of his assumption to power through intensive mobilization of the state military power and stern suppression. He then invited LTTE to join him in the project of sending IPKF away. LTTE responded positively to this invitation and IPKF left the Sri Lankan shores completely in March 1990. Dissanayake, the Sinhala Christian Ambassador, diplomat, and a Harvard scholar, has assessed the presence of the IPKE in Sri Lanka thus:

India has the world’s fourth largest army, next to those of

China, the Soviet Union and the USA. Besides India has the largest Air Force and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest Navy in the world. The might of the armed forces of India had coordinated magnificently in 1971 to rout Pakistan in the war of East Pakistan. Since 1971 India was acutely conscious of her military might in the context of South Asia. Therefore, her experience in Sri Lanka was anything but a happy one. In October 1987 admittedly the IPKF had liberated the Jaffna peninsula in 7 days at a cost of the lives of 253 officers, 2 men and 1047 wounded. Since then over 1000 officers and men were killed in action, and 2500 were wounded. Yet there were no tangible results by the 70,000 to 100,000 strong IPKF in vanquishing the boys.

From March 1990 onwards both the Premadasa government of the LTTE experienced what is referred to as a honeymoon period. This period of peace and cordial relations lasted only 5 months. Hostilities then resumed again with both parties blaming each other for not keeping its promises. With the LTTE killing 13 soldiers and also over 500 policemen of the Northeastern provinces, the cordiality between the government and the LTTE ended. This caused sea and air attacks in the Eastern province especially in Batticaloa and Kalmunai and random killing of any civilians suspected to have LTTE connections by the specially trained government forces. Over 1500 civilian youths and adults were shot, stabbed or burnt to death on the roads and in the shops of Kalmunai town. Thus the romance between the UNP and the LTTE came to an abrupt and tragic end, only to cause the helpless Tamil civilian population face death and decimation. It was remarked by many that the Green Tigers created by the government to annihilate JVP insurrectionist were now sent to the East to perform this operation.

Since 1990 the hostilities between the government and the LTTE have only grown more intensively as the days and years have gone by. Since 1994 the SLFP has resumed the government. Cease-fires and peace talks all fall through halfway into the process. The ethnic crisis yet remains an unresolved problem. The following quotation from the same author, Dissanayake, represents the view of several Sri

Lankan political analysts:

In retrospect, Federalism may have been the answer...the Soulbury commission in 1946 may have recommended a Federal Constitution as in India in 1944....In hindsight, that may have been workable. However, in the present climate, Federalism is unthinkable for the Sinhalese who are a majority with a minority complex. Of late that minority streak surfaces on the slightest provocation and sometimes even without provocation.

Federalism has proved to be workable in Belgium where the two warring factions the Flemish (Dutch) and the Valoons (French) who loath each other have lived in peace for over a century...In the Federal system - be it in a small country such as Switzerland or medium-sized one like Germany, or larger countries such as Australia, India, the USA - the armed forces customs and currency, immigration operate at the national level and the other aspects of government, e.g., education, health, local taxes, etc, operate at the regional level. In Belgium too the system operates identically...However, that arrangement may not be workable in Sri Lanka for two reasons.

First, the Sinhalese are angered by the concept that the northern province might be permanently merged into a northeastern province. Thus one-third of Sri Lanka and two-thirds of her coastline would be under the control of the Tamils who account for a mere one-eighth of the population.

Secondly, the LTTE in general and Prabhakaran in particular will never lay down arms. The military skill of the LTTE is the principal bargaining chip of the Tamils now....

Therefore, the only option left would be annihilating the LTTE militarily which is not feasible...or the creation of the State of Tamil Eelam which is unthinkable to the Sinhalese, for obvious reasons, and also unthinkable for India....Thus as of now there is no viable option to solve our ethnic conflict. Hence, this book has been titled "The Dilemma of Sri Lanka.

In this chapter, we have walked through the post-colonial pathway and we have seen the origin and development of the ethnic crisis erupting from time to time like tidal waves against the minority Tamils. The biggest and most destructive project of violence has been the ethnic riots of 1983. Both the national political force and the larger neighborly Indian superpower force, have failed to establish peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. The final quote in this chapter is a perfect reflection of the frustration of even those in power. In the next chapter, we shall trace out the various endeavors undertaken by the different sectors of people and leadership vis a vi the dilemma of the

Sri Lankan Ethnic Crisis.