

The Sri Lankan Conflict:

A Detailed Backgrounder

(Up to IPKF)

By

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February 2009

Ilangai/Sri Lanka

Ilangai/Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic society of about 19 million people¹. The Sinhalese, who comprise 74 percent of the population, are concentrated in the densely populated Southwest and the Sri Lankan Tamils, whose South Indian ancestors have lived on the island for centuries, live mostly in the Northeast of the country. A distinct ethnic group, the Indian Tamils, whose forebears were brought to Sri Lanka in the 19th century as tea and rubber plantation workers by the British, is clustered on the plantations of the central massif of the country. Other minorities include Muslims (both Moors and Malays), at about seven percent of the population, Burghers, who are descendants of European colonists, and aboriginal Veddahs.

Most Sinhalese are Buddhist and most Tamils Hindu and Christianity is the faith of sizeable minorities of both Sinhalese and Tamils. The majority of the country's Muslims practice Sunni Islam. Sinhala, an Indo-European language, is the native tongue of the Sinhalese and Tamil, a Dravidian language, is the mother tongue of the Tamils and most Muslims (see Tables 1 and 2).²

Table (1)

Ethnic Groups	% (1989)	% (2009)
Sinhalese	72.0	74.0
Sri Lankan Tamils	11.2	
Indian Tamils	9.3	18.0 (all Tamils)
Moors	6.7	7.0
Burghers	0.4	
Malays	0.3	
Others	0.1	

¹The 1989 estimate was 16.6 million people.

²Source: Sri Lankan Government documents.

Table (2)

Religious Groups	% (1989)	% (2009)
Buddhists	67.3	69.0
Hindus	17.6	15.0
Roman Catholics	7.1	
Other Christians	0.8	8.0 (all Christians)
Muslims	7.1	7.0

Until the administrative unification of the country by the British in 1833, the pattern of distribution of the Sinhalese and the Tamils was one of mutual exclusiveness³. This was the result of the differences in ethnicity, language, religion, culture and political organization in the traditional and exclusive homelands of the Sinhalese and the Tamils, to which the respective people owed their first allegiance.

Sinhalese-Tamil Historical Differences

Opinions differ over who are the earliest inhabitants of the island. Satchi Ponnambalam contends that the Tamils were the aboriginal people of Sri Lanka whereas the Sinhalese came with the introduction of Buddhism in the 3rd Century BC, the Muslims arrived to trade from Arabia or India around the tenth Century AD and the Indian Tamils came in the 1840s after the opening of plantations by the British⁴. Basham thinks that "Dravidian infiltration into Ceylon must have been going on from the earliest historical times and probably before." According to G.C. Mendis, **vaddas**, a pre-Aryan aboriginal tribe of hunters who lived in certain parts of the island, probably lived in southern India and walked across before the island got separated from the mainland by a stretch of sea.⁵

³Satchi Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1983):3.

⁴Ibid.,p.2

⁵Basham and Mendis are quoted in A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka: 1947-1973*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974):6.

K. M. de Silva uses both legend and linguistic evidence to establish that the Sinhalese, a people of Aryan origin, immigrated to the island from Northern India about 500 BC. He quotes the **Mahavamsa**, a literary work written in the sixth century AD or probably later, to claim that Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (307-267 BC) who was a contemporary of the great Indian Emperor Asoka⁶. Nonetheless, de Silva adds:

There is little or no reliable information in the **Mahavamsa** on the indigenous population of the island at the time of the Aryan colonization. Knowledge of the island's pre-history remains decidedly meagre even today. Nor is there any firm evidence concerning the dates of the first Tamil settlements in the island.⁷

Although the early settlers issue cannot be settled with any unanimous confirmation, one thing seems to be fairly certain: the existence of historical antagonism between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Even in 237 BC "two Tamil adventurers usurped the Sinhalese throne"⁸ and ruled for twenty-two years and ten years later a Tamil general Elara ruled at Anuradhapura for forty-four years with impartial administration. Dutthagamini, a Sinhalese prince waged a fifteen-year-long campaign and defeated Elara and this major confrontation between the Sinhalese and the Tamils is delved deeply in the **Mahavamsa**. De Silva argues that Dutthagamini's triumph over Elara was "not a victory of a self-conscious Sinhalese proto-nationalism over Dravidian imperialism so much as the first significant success of centripetalism over centrifugalism in Sri Lanka's history" and that ethnicity "was not an important factor in society at the time of the Dutthagamini-Elara

⁶K. M. de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A Survey*, (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1977):32-3.

⁷Ibid., p.37

⁸Ibid.,p.37

conflict."⁹

The British, who were the colonial rulers of the country from 1796, brought the two diverse nations together in 1833 for administrative convenience and withdrew in 1948, leaving them yoked together in a unitary state structure with a Westminster-model constitution. Fred Halliday thinks that the British manipulated and exacerbated the ethnic divisions of the island in their classic strategy of divide and rule to defuse any threat of serious struggle for independence. He argues that the British crystallized the ethnic antagonism in the form of Indian Tamil plantation laborers and promoted a Tamil influx into the colonial bureaucracy and police so as to remove the danger of rebellion by the majority Sinhalese.¹⁰

Problems of Political Participation and National Integration

There were no popular political parties¹¹ in Sri Lanka until 1935 and the British voluntarily granted universal suffrage in 1931 State Council¹² elections without anyone in local political arena having asked for it. Only in the last years before the Second World War, did there emerge a group of Marxist intellectuals and they formed the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1935. The LSSP made some breakthrough in agitating the plantation workers and peasantry and denounced the British war efforts in Asia. Sensing the possible danger of national liberation movement under the leadership of the LSSP, the

⁹Ibid.,p.37

¹⁰Fred Halliday, "The Ceylonese Insurrection," in Robin Blackburn, ed., *Explosion in a Subcontinent*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975):160-1.

¹¹The Ceylon National Congress had been formed in 1919 but was "from the first an elitist organization dominated by men intent in restricting its political initiatives to the well-worn paths of Sri Lankan reformism with its vision limited by an overpowering pragmatism, and its mobility deliberately restricted by an unconcealed desire not to disturb too much the prevailing placidity of political life in the country." K. M. de Silva, *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi-ethnic Societies: Sri Lanka 1880-1985*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986):50.

¹²Legislative Council was later renamed as State Council in 1931.

British dissolved the party in 1940 and imprisoned the leaders.¹³

However, the country was awakening to a new political awareness; and political groups, seeking to build a political program emphasizing the traditional cultural and religious patterns, were popping up. The Ceylon National Congress functioned with the concept of a Ceylonese nationalism which would accommodate the distinctive identities of the ethnic and religious minorities while fostering the Sinhalese Buddhists' primacy in view of their majority status.¹⁴ But Sinhala Maha Sabha, founded by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1937, insisted on the assertion of Sinhalese-Buddhist preeminence in the country's polity.¹⁵

Two other major developments related to achieving a broad-based Sri Lankan nationalism are also worth noting. The Donoughmore Constitution¹⁶ of 1931 advocated neutrality in religious affairs with a special obligation to foster Buddhism, but offered only limited internal self-government for the Tamils instead of full autonomy under a federal system of government. Statesmen like D. B. Jayatilaka¹⁷ were committed to a government in which Buddhists were a big influence rather than an all in all Buddhist government. But

¹³Fred Halliday describes this in detail. Halliday in Blackburn,p.162

¹⁴de Silva, 1986:65.

¹⁵Ibid.,p.66

¹⁶The Donoughmore Constitutional Commission abolished communal representation with the optimistic assumption that it would make different ethnic groups cease to think on communal lines and facilitate national integration. On the contrary, the question of appropriate Sinhalese-Tamil ratio in the legislature continued to be a major issue and deepened the divisions within the country. The ratio of 5:1 brought about in the general elections of 1931 and 1936 on the basis of the Donoughmore reforms did not please the Tamils. Although the Sinhalese leadership offered 57:43 ratio, the Tamil leader Ponnambalam demanded "balanced representation" of 50:50, i.e. 50 seats for the Sinhalese and 50 seats for the other communities. The Donoughmore Constitution was based on the Donoughmore Commission report. See Ponnambalam,p.53

¹⁷D. B. Jayatilaka and D. S. Senanayake had the western concept of a secular state in their minds and advocated broad-based Sri Lankan nationalism. The former's retirement from active politics in 1943 opened the way for a new generation of militant Buddhists. See de Silva, 1986:65-6.

Sinhala Maha Sabha, All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress and other such militant voices pressed ahead with ethnic-religious nationalism as a major political force as they had nursed "a sense of outrage and indignation at what they regarded as the historic injustices suffered by their religion under Western rule."¹⁸

As Buddhist-Sinhalese chauvinism grew, the Tamils adopted a rather defensive posture. As early as in 1931, a Jaffna Youth League¹⁹, who advocated self-government, opposed the Donoughmore Constitution and put forward a plan of boycott of the 1931 State Council general elections. When by-elections were held in 1934 to fill the vacant seats in the State Council caused by the boycott, G. G. Ponnambalam got elected and established his leadership of Tamil politics in the legislature and the country. He founded the Tamil Congress (TC) in 1944.

When the Second World War was over, the British arranged a smooth transfer of power to a Sri Lankan oligarchy who had hurriedly formed the United National Party (UNP) in 1946. The general election to the House of Representatives was held in 1947 which swept the UNP led by Don Stephen Senanayake to power and in Jaffna district; the Tamil Congress got a massive vote. The fundamentalist action of the Senanayake government, the Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) Amendment Act No. 48 of 1949, which disenfranchised almost 500,000 Indian Tamil plantation workers set rolling the avalanche

¹⁸de Silva, 1986: p.66. In my understanding and opinion, this "sense of outrage and indignation" was aimed at all non-Buddhist communities. The terms 'Western,' 'alien' and 'foreign' all had the connotation of non-Buddhist. Halliday corroborates this when he talks about Bandaranaike's "attack on the low-country Christian elite behind the UNP while in fact delivering rabid demagogic thrusts against the Tamil working class and peasantry." Halliday in Blackburn,p.167.

¹⁹de Silva, 1986: pp. 141-2. Satchi Ponnambalam mentions this "amorphous grouping of progressive-minded young men in Jaffna" as the Youth Congress. They had been inspired by the Indian freedom movement and had resolved as far back as in 1929 to seek complete independence for Sri Lanka. They opted a free united Sri Lanka and were totally opposed to the communal politics of both the Sinhalese and the Tamil leadership of the time. Although they welcomed the Donoughmore reforms of abolishing communal representation and extending the franchise, they condemned the failure to grant responsible government. Ponnambalam,p.55

of Sinhalese chauvinism.²⁰

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who had left the UNP in the early fifties resenting the preference of the younger Senanayake and Kotelawela for the premiership at his cost, dreamed of building a party of his own and defeating the UNP. Along with the proposal of a few administrative reforms, he chose to exploit the growing unpopularity of the Kotelawela government and most importantly, the increasing social radicalism: the religious, racial and linguistic chauvinism. As a self-appointed champion of Sinhala Buddhism, tradition and language, he whipped up religious frenzy and language fanaticism against the 'alien' and 'privileged' elements in the society. He carefully incorporated "Sri Lanka" (Holy Ceylon) in the name of his party, abusing the local myth of the Theravada Buddhism which claims that the Sinhalese are a 'chosen people' and that Ceylon is the sacred island selected for them by Buddha himself. Bandaranaike campaigned for the exclusive use of Sinhala as an official language and mobilized the people against corrupt 'foreign' influences.²¹

The year 1956 happened to be the 2,500th anniversary of Buddha Jayanti (birth) and His consecration of 'Sri Lanka' and the period also witnessed the formation of Eksath Bhikku Peramuna (United Monks Front) at the initiative of the Venerable Mapitigama Buddharakkhita Thero, who was a founder-member and patron of Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) launched in 1951. Buddharakkhita-Bandaranaike combine cried to the nation to be ready to sacrifice their lives for the Restoration of Buddhist Ceylon. Subsequently, the SLFP won a massive triumph in the general elections of 1956 in the plank of racial and religious chauvinism, clericalism and anti-imperialist cant. According to Fred Halliday, "the function of his [Bandaranaike's] rabid clerico-chauvinist demagogu

²⁰Halliday in Blackburn,pp.164-5.

²¹Halliday in Blackburn,pp.167-8

was precisely to divert the pent-up anger of the poor against their class brothers of another ethnic group: the Tamils." He argues that the absence of a genuine nationalist movement against the British permitted the provocation of a pseudo-nationalist movement against the Tamils. SLFP seized and distorted both the gathering social crisis and national sentiments fostered but never released against the British.²²

When Dudley Senanayake formed the UNP Government with the support of many small parties after the January 1965 elections, the TC and the Federal Party²³ also lent their support and an MP belonging to the FP was included in the cabinet. In return, Dudley Senanayake signed a pact with Chelvanayakam in March 1965, which was a modified package of what the latter had signed with Bandaranaike in 1957. The former pact had provisions for Regional Councils, direct election of regional councilors and powers for the councils over specified subjects including agriculture, cooperatives, land, land development, colonization, education, health, industries and fisheries, housing, social services, electricity, water schemes and roads.²⁴ The latter pact proposed to establish "District Councils of Ceylon vested with powers over subjects to be mutually agreed between the two leaders."²⁵ Subsequently, the Prime Minister brought before the parliament a District Councils Bill in 1968, which would facilitate grouping of primary local bodies with no additional power whatever. When the opposition complained that it was a major concession to the Tamils, he quickly abandoned the Bill fearing a political storm and the downfall of his precarious government. As a result of all these, the FP

²²Halliday in Blackburn, pp.168-70

²³A splinter group of the Tamil Congress led by S. J. V. Chelvanayakam created in protest of Ponnambalam's joining the D. S. Senanayake Government in 1949. The FP eventually came to assume the leadership of the Tamils in regard to linguistic nationalism.

²⁴Chelvadurai Manogaran, *Ethnic Conflict and reconciliation in Sri Lanka*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 1987):188-9.

²⁵Ibid., p.190

withdrew from government in 1969.²⁶

In the May 1970 general election, the United Front of the SLFP, LSSP and the pro-Russian Communist Party was turned to office ousting the UNP. The failure of both the UNP and the SLFP governments to deliver goods to the desperate masses of Sri Lanka culminated in political crisis and terrorist activities by the Janatha Vimukhti Peramuna²⁷. The JVP cadres gave secret political lectures and the topics included, among other things, the greatness of the Sinhalese heritage and of the Buddhist kings, Indian expansionism through the plantations, the 'Sinhalese road' to revolution - attacks on police stations, then popular insurrection.²⁸ The JVP cherished the same particularism promoted and manipulated by the Sinhalese politicians and the Buddhist clergy as it mobilized the masses only in the Sinhalese central and south-western countryside. Moreover, neither any sense of solidarity among the different ethnic groups nor any concrete practical alliance with the organizations operating among them was aimed at by the JVP.²⁹ So, the JVP's attacks on Indian expansionism and foreign domination naturally aroused anti-Tamil feeling among their followers.

The armed insurrection of JVP raged throughout the country during April and May 1971 and the Government suppressed the revolt with a huge loss in human lives and property. Mrs. Bandaranaike also proclaimed a state of emergency in March 1971 and kept it in force for six years until February 1977. In 1972 her government introduced a new constitution, changed the country's name from Ceylon to Sri Lanka (with Sinhalese and

²⁶Ponnambalam,p.146

²⁷JVP, or People's Liberation Front, originated in a split from the pro-Chinese Communist Party in 1965, cherished great enthusiasm for militant solution to the country's problems and believed strongly in armed insurrection.

²⁸Halliday in Blackburn,p.190

²⁹Ibid.,pp.193-4

Buddhist connotations), declared it a republic and made protection of Buddhism a constitutional principle.³⁰

Autonomy and Separatism

Consequently, hard feelings and violent sentiments strengthened in Tamil areas as the Tamils were systematically discriminated against by the Sinhalese politicians, Buddhist clergy and Sinhala chauvinists and extremists and were never given satisfactory political participation. All Sinhalese parties and politicians were unanimous in their uncompromising attitude toward the Tamils and the difference among them was only a matter of degree of their bellicosity. They never honored their political agreements and conceded the rights of the Tamils. The Tamil political parties, on the other hand, miserably failed in their efforts to work out a solution within the parliamentary framework. Most Tamils could see only two alternatives: equality within a unified polity, which had come to be a meaningless dream, or a separate sovereign Tamil Eelam comprising the north and east. On May 14, 1972, the different Tamil political parties like the FP, TC, Ceylon Workers' Congress, the Ela Thamilar Otrumai Munnani (Eelam Tamils Solidarity Front), several pressure groups, Tamil youth and student organizations met at Trincomalee and formed the Tamil United Front (TUF). Nonetheless, they failed to formulate any strategy to mobilize the people or their struggle for survival as a distinct nation.³¹ Although no Tamil party proposed a total separation prior to the 1970s, concerted action by Tamil parties to resist Sinhalese domination began with the formation of the Tamil United Front in 1972.³²

³⁰Ponnambalam treats the main provisions, their effects and the illegality of the 1972 constitution in detail. See Ponnambalam, pp.163-7.

³¹Ponnambalam,p.178

³²Manogaran,p.57

Winning a by-election by a wide margin in January 1975 on the plank of separation, Chelvanayakam called for a separate Tamil Eelam state. With the open advocacy of separation, Tamil politics came to be highly radicalized by young Tamils. A large number of Tamil youth in Jaffna were detained and tortured when Mrs. Bandaranaike's government agent, Alfred Duraiyappah, was shot dead. More than a hundred youngsters were held in detention for more than a year without being charged with murder. It was at this juncture, the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Indian Tamils, Tamil-speaking Muslims and the TUF leaders met at Pannakam, Vaddukkodai on May 14, 1976 and formed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) with a pledge to establish the state of Tamil Eelam.³³

The UNP, under the party veteran Junius Richard Jayewardene, was returned to power in July 1977 with a huge parliamentary majority. The TULF emerged as the main opposition party and its leader Appapillai Amirthalingom became the leader of the Opposition. Within a month of the UNP government assuming office, the country witnessed another terrifying anti-Tamil riot for two weeks from August 16. Sinhalese thugs went on a rampage killing hundreds of Tamil men, women and children and committing looting and arson. Although the UNP election manifesto had acknowledged the Tamil grievances and pledged to solve them, Jayewardene took no steps to redress the situation.³⁴ Instead, large numbers of Tamil youths were arrested, detained, tortured and then released without charge on proving their innocence to the ruthless torturers. In April 1978, a group of Tamil youths ambushed and captured the notorious Inspector Bastiampillai along with two others and shot them dead. Having been emboldened by this successful operation, they went on the offensive and declared themselves as the Liberation

³³Ponnambalam,pp.183-6

³⁴Ponnambalam,pp.190-6

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).³⁵

In July 1979, the Jayewardene government replaced the "Proscribing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Law (No. 16 of 1978)" by the draconian "Prevention of Terrorism Act, No. 48 of 1979."³⁶ Then the President declared a state of emergency in the Tamil areas from 11 July 1979 and dispatched the Sinhalese army with orders to "wipe out the terrorists."³⁷ The military came to occupy Jaffna district and went on a rampage, killing innocent Tamil youths. The LTTE cadres, on the other hand, kept attacking police stations, killing Sinhalese policemen and snatching away weapons.

Jayewardene, in an effort to curb separatism, established District Development Councils and proposed elections on June 4, 1981. When an unidentified gunman fired a few shots in an election meeting in Jaffna on May 31, the Sinhalese police and army ran berserk even when cabinet ministers and top government officials were present in the city and unleashed a reign of terror and destruction, murder and mayhem in Jaffna until June 8, 1981. In the meantime, the TULF won all the six DDCs in the Tamil areas and all the seats in the Jaffna DDC. When the TULF MPs took the battle to the parliament, the government moved a no-confidence motion on Amirthalingom as the leader of the opposition and passed it on July 24, 1981 without giving him any chance even for personal explanation.³⁸

In July-August 1981 anti-Tamil rioting spread like wildfire all over Sri Lanka. On the eve of the British Queen's visit to Sri Lanka, Jayewardene invited the TULF for talks

³⁵Ponnambalam, p.200, See also Manogaran,p.13

³⁶Ibid, p.201, see also Manogaran, p.65. The Prevention of Terrorism Act permitted suspects to be held incommunicado for up to eighteen months without trial and created classic conditions for torture. Several 'Amnesty International' reports confirmed torture and political killings.

³⁷Ponnambalam,p.203

³⁸Ibid.,p.206-9

and both parties together came up with a peace plan, which was not appreciated by the extremists.³⁹ Subsequently, the Tamil politics came to be divided between the moderate politicians and extremist "liberation movements".

Language, Education, Employment

As the Sinhalese cherished a national self-consciousness in terms of their language, the Tamils too absorbed the concept of linguistic nationalism. The Federal Party of Chelvanayakam came to assume the leadership of the Tamils in this regard. In 1954 Prime Minister Sir John Kotelawela declared his intention to amend the constitution giving "parity of status" to Sinhala and Tamil as official languages. But two other vehement opinions were raised against this. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka Freedom Party, announced in 1955 his party's language policy as Sinhala with 'reasonable use of Tamil', but prominent Sinhalese leaders like Mettananda and Kularatne campaigned for "Sinhala only." Realizing the delicate situation he was in, Kotelawela somersaulted, announced in 1956 UNP's official language policy as "Sinhala only".⁴⁰

On becoming Prime Minister, Bandaranaike rammed through the "Sinhala only" Official Language Act on June 5, 1956 and used the ideological concoction of 'Buddhist socialism' which flared up chauvinistic hostility against the Tamils. In protest, a group of 300 Tamil volunteers under the leadership of Chelvanayakam staged a sit-down satyagraha (non-violent protest) outside the Parliament. The Eksath Bhikku Peramuna organized a march to the House to get the 'reasonable use of Tamil' clause in the bill removed. On confronting the Tamil satyagrahis (non-violent protesters), both the bhikkus

³⁹Ibid, p.211, See also A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 1988) for the text of the peace plan and for the polarization of the Tamil moderates and extremists, pp.165-72.

⁴⁰Ponnambalam, p.93-4.

(holy monks) and the thousands of "Sinhala only" supporters set upon them and beat them up. Anti-Tamil riots broke out instantly and Sinhalese extremist elements went on a rampage of arson and looting of Tamil homes and shops. At least 150 people, including many Tamil women and children died in the riots.⁴¹ On July 26, 1957, Bandaranaike and Chelvanayakam signed a pact which contained only a vague consideration of the Tamil grievances and ineffectual provisions. The Pact outrightly rejected any possibility of abrogating the Official Language Act,⁴² but assured that the proposed legislation would contain "recognition of Tamil as the language of a national minority in Ceylon." It was agreed that "the language of administration in the Northern and Eastern Provinces should be Tamil ... without infringing on the position of the Official Language Act."⁴³ Even that trivial sensitivity to the Tamils' cause being unacceptable, J. R. Jayewardene of the UNP marched to Kandy protesting against the "Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact" in October 1957.

In December, Bandaranaike tabled a bill in parliament to replace the English letters in the motor vehicle number plates by the Sinhalese letters "SRI". The FP demanded that the Tamil equivalent of the Sinhalese letters be authorized for vehicles registered in Tamil areas. The Prime Minister, who had agreed in the "B-C Pact" that Tamil would be the administrative language in Tamil areas, rejected the proposal. Yielding to Sinhalese-

⁴¹Ponnambalam,p.105-6. See also S.J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986):72. Tambiah mentions that the first riots of 1956 flared up in Colombo first and then in the Gal Oya Valley and the Eastern Province.

⁴²The Statement on the General Principles of the Agreement read, among other things:
At the early stages of these conversations it became evident that it was not possible for the Prime Minister to accede to some of the demands of the Federal Party.

The Prime Minister stated that from the point of view of the Government he was not in a position to discuss the setting up of a federal constitution or regional autonomy or any step which would abrogate the Official Language Act. Manogaran, p.187

⁴³Ibid.,p.188

Buddhist extremists' pressure and protest, Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact was eventually abrogated by Bandaranaike in April 1958.⁴⁴

In retaliation to the Tamils' anti-SRI campaign, the Buddhist monks went on defacing Tamil writings on the name boards in government buildings in Colombo and in the Sinhalese areas. And there erupted a boisterous anti-Tamil pogrom in May 1958 which took a heavy toll on the Tamils all over the island. The trouble began when the FP supporters from Batticaloa district, who were returning by train from the FP's annual convention at Vavuniya which had resolved to "launch direct action by non-violent satyagraha" were assaulted at Polonnaruwa railway junction. Another Jaffna-bound train was derailed at Polonnaruwa and Tamil passengers were beaten up. The Sinhalese mobs stopped trains and buses, dragged out Tamil passengers and butchered them.⁴⁵ Setting fire to Tamil shops and homes in nearby villages, Sinhalese crowds surrounded police stations and hampered their communications so that the scattered Tamils could not be secured. Gangs roamed the predominantly Tamil districts ransacking and setting fire to homes, raping women and slaughtering people. Some 300-400 people were killed with over 2,000 incidents of arson, looting and assault and some 12,000 people rendered homeless.⁴⁶ A state of emergency was declared on May 27, 1958 which continued until March 1959. The Federal Party was proscribed and their members placed under house arrest from June until September.

Following Bandaranaike's assassination, January 2, 1960 witnessed the switch-over of administration to 'Sinhala only' policy and the Federal Party called hartal (general strike)

⁴⁴Ponnambalam,p.112

⁴⁵Ibid.,p.113

⁴⁶Howard Wriggins describes the Sinhalese-Tamil riots of 1958 in his book "Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation" as quoted in Tambiah,pp.145-6

in North and East. When Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who captured power in the June 1960 elections, made no progress on the language front, the Federal Party staged Satyagraha (non-violent protest) in North and East in February 1961. As a part of their civil disobedience campaign, the FP men and women picketed the **Kachcheries** (district administrative headquarters) in Tamil areas and effectively paralyzed the government. Mrs. Bandaranaike declared emergency and sent in troops to occupy the northern and eastern provinces. The military atrocities in the next two years were so horrendous that an official inquiry was set up by the same Government later. Despite all these, the Government pursued the "Sinhala only" policy rigorously and passed the Language of the Courts Act, making the courts conduct business in Sinhala rather than English. Having been deeply disappointed, Chelvanayakam inaugurated the "Tamil Arasu (Government) Postal Service" by issuing the FP's postal stamps in Jaffna post offices as a symbol of "Tamil self-government" in April 1961. This was swiftly suppressed by the military and the FP MPs were arrested and detained for six months.⁴⁷

The next Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake and FP leader Chelvanayakam signed the "Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact" on March 24, 1965. The Pact promised that early action would be taken to make Tamil "the language of administration and of record in the Northern and Eastern Provinces." Senanayake 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" and that the Language of the Courts Act would be amended "to provide for legal proceedings in the Northern and Eastern Provinces to be conducted and recorded in Tamil."⁴⁸

In January 1966, Senanayake's government formulated and published the

⁴⁷Ponnambalam,p.121-2

⁴⁸Manogaran,p.190

regulations under the Tamil Language (Special Provision) Act 28 of 1958, which provided for the use of Tamil in Government transactions in the northern and eastern provinces, in the maintenance of public records, in official correspondence and in the local bodies' affairs. The regulations also provided for all legislation and official publications to be issued in Tamil. The SLFP-LSSP-CP trio attacked the regulations as a betrayal of the Sinhalese-Buddhist interest and demonstrated against it. Becoming afraid of the political bearings, Senanayake refused to implement the regulations.⁴⁹

In 1964 the Tamils recorded a moral victory in the Kodiswaran language rights case. When the Tamil government employees who refused to study or work in Sinhala were served with six months' notice of dismissal and harassed, S. Kodiswaran, an executive grade Tamil officer who had refused to sit the Sinhala proficiency test and hence got his increment stopped, sued the government in the Colombo district court. The judgement upheld Kodiswaran's plea and pronounced that the Official Language Act of 1956 and the disputed regulation transgressed the constitutional prohibition against discrimination. The case went upto the Privy Council in London and caused enormous embarrassment to the Colombo government.⁵⁰

In 1973, the Colombo Government came up with an ingenious plan which would systematically squeeze the Tamils out of higher education or force them to take to the study of Sinhala. The **swabasha** policy advocated either Sinhala or Tamil as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. The Tamil students who studied in Tamil would never be able to gain employment as Sinhala was the only official language used in administration and employment. It became possible to let the Sinhalese enter government service without any competition and thus become effective rulers of the powerless Tamil

⁴⁹Ponnambalam,p.145-6

⁵⁰Ponnambalam,p.125-6

masses. Viewed from the other side, this cunning scheme put pressure on Tamil parents to send their children for Sinhala study. The meanness of the whole policy and the prospect of shutting them out from employment created deep despair among the Tamils. Besides that, the National Education Commission recommended that the hitherto merit-based admission to universities and professional institutions be replaced by quotas based on the religious composition of the country.⁵¹

In fact, the Tamils had already been marginalized in many key sectors of employment. Tambiah asserts that the armed forces today are virtually filled by the Sinhalese. In 1983, Tamils formed barely 5% of a standing army of around 11,000 regulars and about 2,000-4,000 volunteers. There has been virtually no recruitment of Tamils into the armed forces and very little into the police for almost thirty years. But for the soon-to-retire age group, Tamils are virtually unrepresented in the army and heavily underrepresented in the police.⁵²

The world-wide interest in Tamil and the Tamils⁵³ led in the late 1950s to the

⁵¹Ponnambalam, pp.173-7

⁵²Tambiah, p.15

⁵³Tamil, the most ancient Dravidian language, is quite anterior to Sanskrit and other Sanskrit-based Aryan languages. Historians establish that the Indus Valley civilization which flourished in South Asia sometime between 2500 to 1900 BC, was that of the Dravidians and the invading nomadic Aryans fought many wars with them and pushed them toward southern India. Scholars also believe that the Dravidian language spoken by the people of the Indus Valley was the antique form of modern Tamil. Taking pride in their ancient classical language with a very old literature, grammar, unique history, and epigraphy etc., and becoming aware that their culture and civilization had been overwhelmed by Aryan and Sanskrit influences, the Tamils in South India campaigned to foster their heritage and identity. There arose social and political movements against "Brahminism" and for the creation of a separate "Dravida Nadu," comprising the four southern states of present-day India. The politics in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu came under the influence of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK - Dravidian Development Organization) who captured power in the State during the 1960s; it was only at the wake of Chinese aggression on India did they give up the claim for separate Dravida Nadu. The DMK has also been pressing for language rights and opposing Hindi imposition in Tamil Nadu. So the developments across the narrow Palk Strait in Sri Lanka is a matter of direct concern for the Tamils of Tamil Nadu and they do watch the events keenly as they themselves are more or less in the same position, a small minority in a predominantly Hindi-speaking India. The Tamil minority in countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius and Fiji also observe the Sri Lankan situation keenly. See also Ponnambalam, pp.181-2.

founding of the International Tamil Research Conference and the hosting of periodic conference in major centers of the world. The fourth conference was held in Jaffna from January 3 to 10, 1974. It was a significant event for the Tamils in Sri Lanka where the Tamil language was denied official status and the Tamil people suppressed. At the customary last day public meeting on January 10, hundreds of Sinhalese policemen threw tear-gas into the crowd and attacked the people without any provocation. Nine Tamils died and hundreds were injured. The fact that the Colombo government was silent made the people suspect Colombo's hand in the police atrocities.⁵⁴

Agricultural and Economic Development of Tamil Areas

The problems in the spheres of language, education and employment obviously had drastic effects on the economic life of the Tamils, as they relied mainly on education and government service for livelihood. The successive Governments in Colombo deliberately isolated the Tamil areas from all the national development projects but poured economic aid into the South with massive development programmes.⁵⁵ Manogaran too substantiates this claim that few major irrigation schemes have been established in the Northern and Eastern provinces in recent years.⁵⁶ Given the economic negligence of their homeland by the successive Colombo Governments, they think that, with substantial devolution of power, they can deal with the economic development of their areas and that their need to work in Sinhalese areas and the problem of discrimination would subside.⁵⁷

Another major grievance of the Tamils, which they see as a calculated effort to

⁵⁴Ponnambalam,p.183

⁵⁵Ponnambalam,p.260

⁵⁶Manogaran,p.108

⁵⁷Manogaran,pp.113-4

destroy their national identity and geographical entity, has been the state-aided colonization of the Sinhalese people in Tamil areas carried out since independence.⁵⁸ By virtue of their long tenure on the island, the Tamils believe that they have as much right as the Sinhalese to consider the country as their legitimate home. They naturally get alarmed by the Sinhalese encroachment and fear that they may become a minority in their own homeland. The proposed regional councils under the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact were to be given powers to select allottees for colonization schemes in Tamil areas.⁵⁹ The Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1965 addressed this question specifically and agreed to observe the following priorities in the allotment of land in the Northern and Eastern Provinces under the Land Development Ordinance:

- 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 of Ceylon, preference being given to Tamil residents in the rest of the island.⁶⁰

The Sinhalese thought that the Tamils should not object to the settlement of Sinhalese people as they had settled in the South with jobs and properties. But the Tamils were not established under government sponsored programs in specific areas so as to change the demographic composition of Sinhalese areas.⁶¹ Manogaran argues that more than 165,000 Sinhalese had been added to the population of the Eastern and Northern provinces

⁵⁸Ponnambalam, p.260

⁵⁹Manogaran, p.87

⁶⁰Manogaran, p.190

⁶¹Manogaran, p.86-7

through the colonization schemes between 1953 and 1981, and that the figure would be much larger if the number of Sinhalese settle prior to 1953 were included.⁶²

The Impasse and the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement

The Liberation Tigers took their struggle to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where they enjoyed so much public sympathy and political support, and established bases there. In October 1982, six crypto liberation organizations formed a revolutionary council advocating armed struggle to establish Tamil Eelam, and a cult of violence came to rule Sri Lanka.⁶³ The liberation groups attacked police stations and killed policemen; in retaliation, the Government harassed and tortured innocent people, intellectuals, social workers and Catholic clergy under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

On May 18, 1983, the Sinhalese army burned Jaffna city for the second time in two years, setting ablaze houses, shops, petrol stations and vehicles. The LTTE called for a boycott of local government elections that day and achieved a near-complete success. On June 3, the Government introduced "Emergency Regulations 15A" and the army was empowered to shoot, kill and bury or cremate the bodies without post-mortem and judicial inquest. The army killed several Tamil youths and refused to hand over the bodies and the Tigers blamed torturing and killing of innocent civilians on the army. On July 22, the army abducted three Tamil girls and raped them; one of the girls later committed suicide. The next day, the LTTE, in retaliation, ambushed an army truck at Tinneveli and killed thirteen soldiers. Consequently, the army went on a killing spree and over 30 people including some school children were shot dead.⁶⁴

⁶²Manogaran,p.97

⁶³Ponnambalam,pp.218-9

⁶⁴Ponnambalam, pp.223-5, see also Tambiah, 21-7, Tambiah asserts that "more than any other previous ethnic riot, the 1983 eruption showed organized mob violence at work."

Following the public display of the thirteen corpses in Colombo's central cemetery, there began an orgy of killing of Tamils in Colombo, arson and looting for three consecutive days. Hundreds of Tamils were killed in Colombo and elsewhere; tens of thousands were left homeless; over 100,000 Tamils fled to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu; and the Tamils in the South and plantations fled to the North. Some fifty-three Tamil political detainees held in maximum security in Colombo's Welikade prison were massacred with the complicity of the prison officials. All put together, the June-July anti-Tamil holocaust consumed more than 500 innocent lives.⁶⁵

By mid-1987, the situation had reached an impasse. Since April 1987 the Tamil separatist groups stepped up their war against the Sri Lankan Government, killing hundreds of Sinhalese people. Jayewardene announced that the fighting would continue till one party had won. He ordered a blockade of Tamil strongholds and unleashed a wave of attacks by jet fighters. This action gave rise to popular resentment and anger in Tamil Nadu and New Delhi was pressed to act. In June, India sent an Indian Navy flotilla carrying relief supplies with Indian Red Cross officials and Red Cross flags. As they were turned away by Sri Lanka, New Delhi sent a squadron of transport planes over Tamil strongholds in northern Sri Lanka and dropped 25 tons of emergency provisions to the civilian population. By doing so, India sent a clear message to Jayewardene that he would have to give way or live with India's hostility, which might result in Indian military intervention. Thus the Sri Lankan government's policy of pressing the militants militarily while attempting to negotiate with the moderates did not succeed.⁶⁶

India, the dominant neighbor of Sri Lanka with more than 50 million Tamils of its

⁶⁵See Ponnambalam, p.225; Tambiah, p.22; Profile (mimeo) published by the Sri Lankan embassy in Washington (March 1989),p.5

⁶⁶Internal Reports of the British Refugee Council and the Danish Refugee Council

own, took enormous interest in the communal dispute in the island nation. The Tamil plantation laborers and the Tamils in the North and East had strong ethnic and cultural relations with the Tamils of Tamil Nadu. This Indian connection facilitated the Tamil movements' establishing themselves in Tamil Nadu as well as generating a massive refugee influx. Both Madras (capital of Tamil Nadu) and New Delhi exercised political leverage over the Tamil militant groups. Moreover, being a regional power, India also had geopolitical interest in Sri Lankan affairs.

Sinhalese chauvinists, on the other hand, had a sort of minority complex and uneasiness about the massive Tamil population across their shores in India and perceived India, owing to its large size, population and power, as a possible threat to their safety and security. They exaggerated this anti-India sentiment to provoke the Sinhalese masses against the Tamil plantation workers and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. In view of all these complex factors, the joint effort of Sri Lanka and India to break the deadlock looked meaningful.

Rigorous talks were held between Indian officials and the representatives of the LTTE, EROS (Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students) and the TULF; and between the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M. G. Ramachandran and the LTTE Supremo V. Prabhakaran. Prabhakaran, who was strongly opposed to the contents of the proposed "Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement," eventually agreed to accept it under great pressure by both Delhi and Madras. On July 29, 1987, the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement was signed by the Sri Lankan President Jayewardene and the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at Colombo.⁶⁷

The Agreement gave India a key role in the peace process and the first five sections expressed the desire to preserve the island's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity

⁶⁷Ann-Belinda Steen, "Peace in Sri Lanka? A Report on the Present Situation," The Danish Refugee Council (August 1987):5.

(1.1); acknowledged that Sri Lanka was a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual plural society (1.2); recognized that the cultural and linguistic identity of ethnic groups should be nurtured (1.3); agreed that the North and the East had been "areas of historical habitation of the Tamil-speaking peoples" (1.4) and accepted that all citizens should live in equality, safety and harmony.

Article 2.18 of the agreement potentially solved the language question by stipulating: "the official language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala. Tamil and English will also be official languages." As regards the devolution of power, the Northern and Eastern provinces would be merged (subject to later referendum for permanent merger) "to form one administrative unit" (2.1) and it would have one elected Provincial Council with one Governor, one Chief Minister and one Board of Ministers (2.2). The Agreement stipulated that the state of emergency would be lifted in the Eastern and Northern Provinces by August 15, 1987, those hostilities would cease within 48 hours from the signing of the Agreement, and that all arms presently held by militant groups would be surrendered to authorities to be designated by the Sri Lankan government (2.9).

The Tamils, although welcoming the Agreement and the Indian Peace Keeping Force, resented the need for the future referendum in the Eastern Province to enable the people to decide if they should remain linked with the Northern Province or constitute a separate administrative unit as described in article 2.3 of the Agreement. They did not see any reason why a referendum should be held about their traditional homeland, which had been clearly acknowledged in section 1.4 of the Agreement. They were concerned by the facts that the large number of Sinhalese people, who had been settled in the Eastern Province over the past few years by Colombo, would vote against the merger and that the Muslims, though they were Tamils, might be divided on the question of merger.⁶⁸

⁶⁸Ann Belinda-Steen, p.7.

On the other hand, the Agreement created great anger and unrest among the Sinhalese population. They felt that Jayewardene had compromised Sri Lanka's independence for the elusive peace with the Tamils and they saw the Agreement as the first step towards establishing a separate Tamil Eelam. In fact, scarcely had the signing ceremony been over when the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, was brutally attacked and nearly killed by a Sinhalese sailor in the guard of honor given to him during his departure from Colombo. In the following days, Sri Lanka witnessed the worst anti-government riots for 16 years and at least 40 people were killed and more than 200 injured in the riots led by the Buddhist monks and Sinhala chauvinists. They denounced the Agreement as a forgery and vehemently opposed India's interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. An unsuccessful assassination attempt was made on President Jayewardene in August.⁶⁹

Thus, from the very beginning of the peace process, both communities of the island were not favorably inclined to the Agreement. Moreover, the Agreement needed genuine obligingness from both the Sri Lankan Government and the militant groups; all that was not written in the Agreement had to be formulated through negotiations between these two bitterly antagonistic, suspicious, reluctant and unreasonable parties. Even within the Sri Lankan Government, there were deep divisions and differences of opinion about the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. While the President worked out and signed the Agreement, his own Prime Minister, R. Premadasa, and the Minister for National security, Lalith Athulathmudali, were strongly against it. Premadasa boycotted both the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Colombo and the signing ceremony. But a senior Minister in charge of Land, Gamini Dissanayake, supported the arrangement.

⁶⁹Ibid.,p.6-7

* Occasional Paper Series No. 2 will be released soon along with bibliographic details of the books used.