

# **THE ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA: A HISTORICAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL OUTLINE**

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# THE ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA: A HISTORICAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL OUTLINE<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Introduction

Why does the World Bank need to understand the socio-cultural and political roots of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict? A recent Bank document commenting on the international response to the crisis in Rwanda observes that the unavailability of detailed knowledge of the historical, political, social and economic background of the crisis in Rwanda undermined the effectiveness of international intervention (A Framework for World Bank Involvement in Post Conflict Reconstruction 1997: 6). This situation also applies to Sri Lanka. That is, any program of rehabilitation, relief and reconstruction in particular must necessarily be preceded by a comprehensive understanding of the conflict that has made such relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction necessary in the first place. The mere existence of literature on different aspects of the conflict does not necessarily mean that such knowledge is readily and easily accessible in terms of institutional needs. For instance, political biases in such works or analytical lapses have to be correctly identified. It is then on the basis of these assumptions that this document has been written, identifying and analyzing the root causes of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. It is primarily intended to be a socio-historical review of the main events and dynamics that created and sustained the conflict involving the Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi religious country where a number of ethno-religious groups have been co-existing for centuries. But that co-existence has not always been without stress, tension and sometimes violence. The current ethnic conflict involving the country's Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority is primarily a 20th century phenomenon which nevertheless has some of its roots in the period of colonial British rule from 1815 to 1948. But in the popular perception of the past, the manner in which both Sinhalas and Tamils perceive and interpret what they believe as their authentic history has much to do with how the conflict is understood at the popular level. The political process in the country is also influenced by ethnicity, religion and sometimes caste in that socio-cultural markers such as ethnicity and religion often play a vital and even divisive role. In this context electoral area demarcation, political party formation, party affiliation, political mobilization, and voter preferences may depend on these considerations. It is important to understand how ethnic conflict and the resulting violence originated and evolved in Sri Lanka, since ethnic conflict and institutionalization of political violence have now become two of the most serious issues facing the country. These phenomena threaten the country's fragile democratic institutions and impede its socio-economic growth by diverting much needed funds from development initiatives to military and counter insurgency activities as well as to rebuilding destroyed infra-structure. In addition, the violence associated with the conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Sections in this paper draws heavily from the following sources: 1) *Political Violence in Sri Lanka: Dynamics, Consequences and Issues of Democratization* by Sasanka Perera. Colombo: Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR), 1998, 2) *Teaching and Learning Hatred: The Role of Education and Socialization in Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict* by Sasanka Perera. Santa Barbara: University of California (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, 1991).

has taken a serious psychological toll on survivors. In the following outline, I would attempt to place in context the origins and the development of the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalas and Tamils by focussing on the most critical junctures and incidents of its socio-political evolution.

The inter-ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka has many root causes and consequences that are closely inter-linked. However, given the complexities of the current conflict, it should not be assumed that these causes are part of unilinear historical process where one event led to another and so on. Often many of the issues that may be regarded as root causes arose within a single but extended context and equally as often, simultaneously. It is primarily within the context of ethnic politics that the manifestation of language politics and ethnic politics of education can be located. However, for purposes of analysis and discussion it would be necessary to separate these issues as clearly identifiable themes that would necessarily emerge in any analysis of the Sri Lankan conflict. In general, these themes can be broadly identified as follows:

- \* Ethnic politics and the interpretation of the past
- \* Politics of language
- \* Politics of education
- \* Militarization of ethnic conflict and issues of trauma

## **1.2 Demographic Patterns**

Sri Lankan society is an ethno-religious mosaic. According to recent (1981) statistics, the population of Sri Lanka can be categorized in the following manner: the Sinhalas constitute 73.95% (10,980,000) of the population; Sri Lankan Tamils account for 12.70% (1,887,000); Indian Tamils make up 5.52% (819,000); Muslims constitute 7.05% (1,047,000); Burghers make up 0.26% (39,000); Malays, followers of Islam, account for 0.32% (47,000); numerous other small groups make up 0.19% (28,000) (Department of Census and Statistics 1988: 12-14).

Within these ethnic groups, there are clear religious divisions as well. Buddhists, who are Sinhalas, make up 69.30% (10,288.3). Hindus, who are Tamils (Sri Lankan and Indian), constitute 15.48% (2,297.8). Muslims constitute the only ethnic group in Sri Lanka who have a single term to denote ethnicity and religion. They and Malays, who are also Muslim by religion, account for 7.55% (1,121.7) of the population. Christians, made up of Burghers and a minority of Tamils and Sinhalas account for 7.61% (1,130.6) (Department of Census and Statistics 1988: 12-14). Numerous ethnic groups of Indian origin, Africans, Chinese, Veddas and others are collectively identified under the statistical category of "others."

To a certain extent, ethnicity and religion also have a regional basis, which is one significant reason why the Tamil militancy has a strong geographical dimension, which has logically extended to the demand of a separate independent state. Of the ethnic and religious groups identified above, Tamil Hindus predominate in the Northern Province and maintain a significant presence in the Eastern Province. The Eastern Province is (or was before the outbreak of protracted violence and low intensity conflict in the early 1980s) an ethnically mixed area where Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalas were found in

sizeable numbers even though Tamils have a slightly higher statistical edge over others. Indian Tamils who are the descendants of laborers brought from Southern India by the British in the 19th century to work in their tea and coffee estates are concentrated in parts of Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa Provinces. Sinhala Buddhists predominate in all parts of the country except the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Muslims have a significant concentration in the Eastern Province but on the average are scattered throughout the country. Christians maintain a significant presence in the coastal areas as a result of over five hundred years of constant European colonial expansion, and the consequent Christianization of significant numbers of the population in these areas. However, Christians are found in all parts of the country in small numbers. Malays are mostly concentrated in and around the city of Colombo and the Western Province.

By the time Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948 from Britain, there were many expectations that the country would become a model democracy. Universal adult franchise had been introduced in the 1930s, democratic institutions and traditions had been in place and political violence was not an issue. Moreover, by the 1950s literacy in Sri Lanka was on the rise and there were no serious indicators of economic or social catastrophes of the years to come. However, even before independence, there were clear indications of ethnic politics that were to emerge later, and as early as in 1956, Sinhala mobs attacked Tamil civilians led by their political leaders who had been protesting in Colombo against the passing of the so called "Sinhala Only Bill" (Official Language Act, No 33 of 1956). The aim of the bill was to declare Sinhala the official language of the country replacing English. Anti-Tamil violence of 1956 was reported from other areas of the country also along with predictable anti-Sinhala violence from Tamil dominated areas of the north-east. That spurt of initial violence against Tamils was later to continue, and by the 1980s had reached seriously protracted proportions, which involved low intensity military conflict in the north east, Tamil guerrilla incursions to the capital and a steady militarization of society.

### **2.1 The Dynamics of Sinhala - Tamil Ethno-cultural Identity Formation:**

The overall context of the violence outlined above has to be located in the manner in which minority and majority relations have been conducted in the recent past, and the manner in which different ethnic groups perceive the past colored by the ethnic tensions of the present. In ancient Sri Lanka, as far as surviving written records and oral traditions indicate, ethnicity was a social factor though it was not a ubiquitous political issue. Tamil and Sinhala ethno-cultural identities which came into existence after the twelfth or thirteenth century (and much later by other estimates)<sup>2</sup> were profoundly revitalized and manifested themselves in a mutually aggressive and confrontational manner only in times of external aggression from South India.

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<sup>2</sup> For a good analysis of the dynamics of ethno-cultural identity formation in Sri Lanka, see "The generation of Communal Identities" by Elizabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat and "The People of the Lion: The Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography" by R.A.L.H. Gunawardana. In, Jonathan Spencer ed., *Sri Lanka: The History and the Roots of Conflict*. London: Routledge.

In the final analysis, both Sinhala and Tamils of today are descendants of immigrants from mostly southern parts of India. At the level of popular perception, Sinhala believe that they belong to a superior ethnic group called “Aryans” who trace their descent from *northern* parts of India. The perceived North Indian and Aryan ancestry of Sinhala is a fundamental component in the Sinhala origin myth while it is also a corner stone in their popular perception of themselves. However, as recent critical socio-historical scholarship has documented, the mega identity of the Sinhala is something that has come into existence over a long period of evolution. Gunawardena has argued that the term Sinhala was used to refer to different groups in different times. The earliest available records indicate that the word referred to the royalty and at a second state it referred to a much extended group which also included other nobles. It was only in much later time that the word was used to refer to the kingdom and a section of the people within it (Gunawardena 1990).

Similarly, Tamil popular perception and nationalist historiography and mythmaking suggest that Sinhala lack pedigree and that Tamils once ruled all of Sri Lanka (Ponnambalam 1982, Gunasegaram 1985). They also consider themselves “Dravidians”<sup>3</sup> and trace their descent to South India. The myth making in Tamil nationalist discourse became much stronger and more dynamic in the 1980s in the context of the expanding interethnic conflict and aggressive Sinhala mythmaking. Some strains of these myths suggest that Tamils of contemporary Sri Lanka are descendants of the inhabitants of the great centers of Indian civilization in Mohenjodaro and Harappa (Gunasinghe & Abesekera eds., 1987).

These assumptions and claims, part of the origin myths of Sinhala and Tamils, are replete with inaccuracies in terms of history which the few critical scholarship on the subject have not yet been able to dispel (Gunawardena 1990, Siriweera 1976). The general thrust of such myth making in both groups was to establish the “greatness” of each group and its long term presence in the country preceding the claims of the rival groups. Thus the Tamil myths linking their origin to great **centers of Indian civilization was both an attempt to enhance their relative greatness over the Sinhala as well as to establish the claim that they arrived in Sri Lanka prior to the Sinhala. These identities and their constituent components have changed considerably over time.**

Nevertheless, since the formation of these two identities, the bulk of the Tamil speaking population tended to congregate in northern and eastern Sri Lanka and the majority of Sinhala speaking population in the south. As a result of constant South Indian invasions, the Sinhala abandoned their early dry-zone settlements like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and migrated south to the wet zone and later to the central hills where they now predominate. The Tamils settled themselves in the north and east, and seldom ventured south in a military sense in pursuit of the Sinhala.

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<sup>3</sup> In contemporary mainstream academic discourse, both Aryan and Dravidian are used as linguistic categories to identify clusters of related languages, and makes no reference to ethnicity or race.

Over time, the former great population centers of the dry zone were completely abandoned and overrun by advancing tropical jungle. This abandoned area functioned as a buffer zone which physically segregated the bulk of Tamil and Sinhala populations, even though official contacts did exist between Tamil rulers of the north and the southern Sinhala rulers. In some cases Tamil rulers paid tribute to kings in the south, especially to Kandyan kings (Devaraja 1988). Though limited trade and some interpersonal relations always took place between the two population clusters, the buffer zone was so entrenched that it prevented free and fluid interactions between Sinhala and Tamil masses. Perhaps, this also prevented the occurrence of regular inter-ethnic conflagrations, which became somewhat endemic in the 1970s and 1980s. Given the relatively abundant availability of resources, the two groups had fewer reasons to compete for scarce resources, as they do today.

This state of affairs continued until European colonization began in the 15th century. The Portuguese, Dutch and British viewed the island as a single administrative unit. The Portuguese defeated the independent Tamil kingdom in Jaffna and brought all coastal areas under their control. The Dutch continued this process. The British conquered the entire country in 1815 and ended the physical segregation of north and south by building roads and railways linking all parts of the island. The opening of the economy and the firm entrenchment of the capitalist market economic system motivated many Tamils to migrate south.

## **2.2 The Emergence of Ethnic Politics**

To a certain extent, the emergence of ethnic politics can be understood in the context of colonialism in general and some colonial practices and policies in particular. Ethnic politics however was not clearly manifest until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From the very beginning of colonial rule, the British introduced an extremely divisive and parochial form of limited representation based on caste, ethnicity and religion. This kind of 'communal' representation in a systemic sense was retained until 1931 (Nissan 1996: 10). Nevertheless, as a tradition, this system has in many ways survived to date, and is the precursor of the current ethnic conflict.

In many multicultural societies, in times of socio-economic and political difficulties, it is not unusual to see one ethnic group becoming the target of another's frustrations. In this regard Sri Lanka is no exception. Sri Lanka has a clear tradition of ethnic and religious conflict in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century in times of socio-economic and political stress. In most instances, the violence was unleashed upon ethnic or religious minorities by members of the Sinhala majority. The Kotahena riots in Colombo in 1883 were the culmination of Buddhist – Catholic distrust which had evolved over time. The riot itself occurred due to the violation of what was perceived by local Catholics as sacred space. A Buddhist procession winding its way past a Catholic church was the immediate cause for the violence of 1883. The anti-Muslim violence of 1915 was the result of trade rivalries between Muslim and Sinhala traders, even though a specific incident of violating sacred space was once again the immediate cause which sparked off the island-wide violence. These conflicts hardly were the result of long and well-established antagonisms. The antagonisms and violence against Malayalis in the 1920s and 1930s also has to be understood in the context of economic

competition particularly in a time economic depression. The Malayalis who constituted a significant component of the work force, particularly in the city, were perceived as an economic threat by many Sinhalas. This suspicion was increased when industrialists in the first two decades of this century used cheap Malayali labor to sabotage key industrial strikes. The anti-Malayali agitation diminished only after most of them returned to India by the 1940s. Thus, ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka also has to be understood in the context of this tradition.

While exploitable immediate causes always existed, most conflicts of this nature were the creations of vote-seeking politicians, a negative consequence of democratic politics. Politicians found especially fertile grounds for violent in ethnic politics when the the people were experiencing economic and socio-political difficulties. Thus the anti-Malayali agitation was spear-headed by the once "radical" labor movement of A.E Gunasinghe. Likewise, the 1915 ant-Muslim riots also have to be understood in the context of politics of Buddhist revivalists such as Anagarika Dharmapala. Throughout the 20th century the circumstances under which conflicts arose, how ideologies were constructed, and the manner in which conflicts were fueled have remained reasonably constant, while the minority groups targeted have changed over the years (Perera 1989: 3).

The initial impetus to the conflict between Sinhalas and Tamils in the contemporary sense arose with the decreasing Malayali presence, deteriorating quality of life, increasing competition for scarce resources and the continuing process of ethnic politics at national level. Even though the conflict with Tamils, particularly in its violent manifestations did not surface until after independence, some of its causes can be traced to the period of colonialism.

However, relations between Tamils and Sinhalas have not always or consistently been antagonistic. This happened only in times of external threats from South India after the formulation of clear Sinhala and Tamil ethnic or cultural identities in the 9th (or 12th) century. These wars were wars of dominance fought between regional rulers and were not 'race' wars as defined later. Pali historical chronicles like the *Mahawamsa* and *Pujavaliya* compiled by Sinhala Buddhist monks defined these wars as campaigns undertaken to protect Buddhism and the Sinhala nation. This was mainly because these chronicles were written in times of political instability characterized by constant invasions from South India. Mainly due to reinforced by formal education, many Sinhalas accept these problematic interpretations as fact today. In the eyes of many Sri Lankans, these interpretations seem to suggest a long and bloody tradition in which hope for reconciliation is minimal. Reality plays little part in these interpretations. However, beliefs are sometimes more important than realities. Significantly, these interpretations, with their potent and emotional contents have also found their way into school textbooks, which is an important agency of social and political socialization in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Forces of Sinhala nationalism perpetuating notions of eternal conflict with Tamils had been gathering strength since before independence. Many of them were Sinhala educated rural folk whose nationalist aspirations for cultural transformation, power and status did not automatically materialize with independence. Soon after independence it

was clear that due to reasons outlined above a conflict was emerging between Sinhala educated rural elite and the English educated urban ruling elite.

### 2.3 Issues of Language and Interethnic Conflict

In addition to the barriers imposed by the continued use of the English language as the official language of the state, the emerging nationalist forces referred to above also perceived that Sri Lankan Tamils had access to a disproportionate share of power as a consequence of educational opportunities in the colonial period and were also disproportionately represented in the administration (Nissan 1996). Moreover, considerable mercantile interests were also controlled by non Sinhala groups which had become an issue in nationalist politics from the beginning of this century (Nissan 1996: 11). These fears and concerns were a basis for the politics of language that were to emerge.

The first resounding victory of such Sinhala nationalist forces was the election of S.W.R.D Bandaranaike as Prime Minister in 1956. His main election promise was the establishment of Sinhala as the official language of the country, replacing English. The new government fulfilled this promise soon after the election giving no status of parity to the Tamil language. In the colonial period, both Tamil and Sinhala politicians espoused the idea of *swabasha*, which, literally translates into as 'native languages.' By this, they meant that in the post independent period primacy of place should be given to local languages, namely Sinhala and Tamil. Contrary to Tamil nationalist claims and some contemporary academics, politics of language have not always been a reflection of inter-ethnic rivalry. In its initial stages, when demands for *swabasha* (local languages) rights surfaced, the politics of language were a class issue even though some blurred outlines of Sinhala aspirations could be detected. These sentiments were not clearly articulated and did not receive popular support in the early stages (Perera 1991). Demands for *swabasha* rights emerged as a protest against the privileges enjoyed by English educated elite, which were not open to the masses educated in the local languages (Perera 1991).

Nevertheless, as early as in 1944 J.R. Jayawardena moved a resolution in Parliament to declare "Sinhalese the official language of Ceylon within a reasonable number of years" (Kearney 1967: 63). An amendment was proposed by V. Nallaiyah, a Tamil state councilor, providing for both Sinhala and Tamil as official languages, which was seconded by R.S.S. Gunawardena, a Sinhala state councilor. The resolution in this form was approved by 27 to 2 in the Sinhala-dominated legislature, another sign of the lack of ethnic overtones in the issue of official languages at this stage (Kearney 1967: 63, Kasynathan & Somasundaram 1981: 55, Debates in the State Council of Ceylon, 1944: 745-746, 816-817, Perera 1991). The resolution specified that Sinhala and Tamil would become the languages of instruction in schools, examinations for public services and legislative proceedings.

In 1945, at the suggestion of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike a select committee was appointed under the chairmanship of J.R. Jayawardena to advise how changes were to be implemented. In 1946, the committee submitted its report strongly favoring the establishment of local languages as official languages replacing English. It also

recommended that the transition take place over a period of ten years (Sessional Paper XXII, 1946: 12). The UNP policy of gradual transition ran into a number of problems. In 1951, an Official Languages Commission was established to determine the procedures to be followed in the replacement process. By late 1953 the commission still had not offered any suggestions. In the same year, Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake stressed again the UNP's commitment to gradual change.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike left the UNP in 1954 citing the government's inaction in implementing the new official language policies. Within days after his resignation Bandaranaike launched a concerted attack on the UNP claiming to see "no difficulty in the way of the early adoption of our languages" (Kearney 1967: 65). Soon after his resignation, Bandaranaike organized the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and began to organize the forces supporting the *swabasha* movement within Sinhala society in an attempt to create a broad-based coalition to wrest political power from the UNP in the upcoming general election (Perera 1991). Even at this stage the language issue had not become a divisive ethnic issue. In this regard the SLFP manifesto claimed that "it is most essential that Sinhalese and Tamil be adopted as official languages immediately so that the people of this country may cease to be aliens in their own land---" (reproduced in Kearney 1967: 65).

But despite these signs of tolerance, as stated earlier, soon after the electoral victory in 1956, the SLFP government passed the Sinhala Only Bill making language a permanent and thus far irreconcilable issue in the Sri Lankan interethnic conflict. Moreover, the non violent protests organized by Tamil leaders to protest the provisions of the Sinhala Only Bill ushered in the first wide scale anti Tamil violence in this century.

Amidst the wave of cultural revivalism that swept the country from this period onwards, an increasing process of Sinhalization of the state was clearly visible. In this scheme of things, the nation was conceptualized in exclusively Sinhala Buddhist terms, which affectivity excluded minorities from the project of nation-building.

The language issue in many ways brought the Sinhala-Tamil conflict into the forefront of Sri Lankan politics and has continued unabated since then. The demand for "Sinhala only" legislation was made for nationalist as well as economic reasons. In terms of the dominant strands of Sinhala nationalism, the Sinhala language along with the Buddhist religion necessarily had to occupy the pre-eminent position in society. This was perceived to be the only way the glory of ancient Sinhala civilization could be revitalized.

Even though the Tamil has been decreed an official language along with Sinhala in terms of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, the damage caused by the politics of language generally remain un-addressed. Moreover, the vast gap between the official recognition of Tamil as an official language and the practical implementation of the provisions and conditions it entails, is yet to be bridged.

## 2.4 Interethnic Conflict and Education

Since the 1970s, access to education, particularly access to higher education has been ethnicized. In addition, many other aspects of education, including the structural organization of schools and universities, contents of textbooks and training of teachers have impacted directly on inter-ethnic conflict.

Compared to other ethnic and religious groups in the country, Tamils have had strong cultural norms which valued education. Education was considered the most worthwhile legacy one could provide one's children because all other inheritances are material and therefore perishable (Hellman-Rajanayagam 1984: 133). This notion was a major premise in the *Tirukkural*, the Tamil holy book of aphorisms (Arasaratnam 1965: 115, Bastiampillai 1981). On the other hand, traditional Tamil education was not exclusively linked with religion unlike its Sinhala counterpart. This made Tamils far less resistant towards attending missionary-controlled English language schools which were the passport to higher education and better employment in the colonial period (Perera 1989: 15, Hellman-Rajanayagam 1984: 134). At the same time, as a consequence of well funded American missionary activities, the Tamil dominated Northern Province had comparatively better facilities for English language and pre-university education.

There was also a limit beyond which Tamils could not be absorbed within the traditional land-based occupations in the arid areas where they predominated. This further encouraged many to seek employment through education. The net result of these combined circumstances was the relative over-representation of Tamils in higher education, professions and the administration in comparison to their status in the general population. By the time Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948, Tamils constituted over 30% of government services admissions, which was substantially larger than their proportion in the general population (Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils together have never totaled over 18% of the population). In 1956, eight years after independence, Tamils constituted 30% of Ceylon Administrative Service personnel, 50% of the clerical personnel of the railway, postal and customs services, 60% of all doctors, engineers and lawyers, 40% of the armed forces and 40% of other labor forces (Perera 1989: 15, 16, 38).

In the context of this scenario, post independent Sinhala nationalism sought to curb the Tamil presence in education and thus also in the professions and civil administration. In other words, curbs on access to higher education were also perceived as a means of reducing Tamil advantage in jobs and influence. The passing of the Sinhala only Bill was one attempt in this overall process. More direct hurdles were placed on the path of Tamils' realization of educational goals since the 1970s. The constitutional provisions in the 1972 constitution of the United Front government favoring the Sinhala language and Buddhist religion convinced many Tamils that they had been perceived as a marginal community in national life. The United Front government's educational policies further confirmed this belief. These changes were designed to expand Sinhalas' access to higher education. Up to 1971, individuals entered universities on the basis of competitive examinations conducted at national level, and marks were given on a uniform basis. Those who scored highest, gained access to different faculties in universities irrespective of their ethnicity or districts from which they came. While there

was no bias inherent in this system, Tamils from Jaffna and Colombo did particularly well. For example, in the 1969-1970 intake to science and engineering courses, Tamils constituted 35%, while they constituted over 45% of the intake of engineering and medical faculties (quoted in Nissan 1996: 12).

From 1971 onwards, a new system was introduced, which ensured that the number of students qualifying for university entrance from each language was proportionate to the number of students who sat for university entrance examination in that language. In real terms this meant that Tamil speaking students had to score much higher than Sinhala speaking students to gain admission to universities. This also meant that for the first time, the integrity of university admissions policy was tampered with by using ethnicity as a basis. In 1972, a district quota system was introduced in order to benefit those not having adequate access to educational facilities within each language stream (for example, Sinhala speaking Kandyans were generally under represented in higher education as were Tamil speaking Muslims, particularly from the Eastern Province). These changes had a serious impact on the demographic patterns of university entry. The Tamil representation in the science based disciplines fell from 35.3% in 1970 to 19% in 1975. The Sinhala representation in all disciplines increased quite dramatically. In 1975, Sinhala accounted for 78% of places in the science based disciplines while in the humanities and social sciences they held over 86% of the placements (quoted in Nissan 1996: 13).

In general, these policies seriously impacted upon not only the chances of Tamils to gain access to higher education, but also on the overall process of interethnic relations as well. In 1977, the language based admission policy was abolished by the UNP regime that had come to power that year, and since that time various adjustments have been introduced on the basis of merit, district quotas, disadvantaged area quotas etc. While the obvious ethno-linguistic discrimination of the 1971 policy has long been dismantled, the serious loss of integrity in the system brought about by constant tampering with it has not been restored. As a result, many Tamil youth still feel that they are discriminated against in access to higher education.

In any event, the ethnic divisions and animosities in Sri Lanka tend to manifest within the education structure in the country in a number of other ways, which are much more long lasting and far more insidious than the more visible ethno-linguistic discrimination of the 1970s. These problematic manifestations can be located in the following areas:

- A. The organizational structure of educational institutions.
- B. The training of teachers.
- C. The content of textbooks and syllabi.

In so far as the educational structure of Sri Lankan educational institutions are concerned, it is clear that language based segregation takes place within schools, universities and other institutes of higher education. This situation does not apply to privately owned institutions within which instruction is imparted in English. However this applies to institutions where more than one language of instruction exists (such as some universities, mixed media schools and technical institutes) where a system of internal segregation takes place. What this means in real terms is that Sinhala students

are segregated into Sinhala language schools and Tamil and Tamil-speaking Muslim students are segregated into Tamil language schools (Often however, Muslims and Tamils are further segregated on the basis of ethnicity). If they enter universities or technical institutes, this segregation is likely to continue unless they opt to, and have the money to receive a non-segregated further education in English in private institutions.

The exception to this rule would be some state institutions (e.g., some university departments where instruction is given in all three languages [Department of Law, University of Colombo]) where students can opt for the medium of instruction of their choice. But given the legacy of segregated school education and the general backwardness of English language education in the country, very few have the required background or make the choice to educate themselves in a non segregated environment even when state sector educational institutes may sometimes give the choice.

In the final analysis, what this means is that the voluntary and relatively segregated routine life of most Sri Lankans is replicated in a great majority of educational institutions. As a result, schools in Sri Lanka are generally reckoned on the basis of their ethno-linguistic/ religious identity: Sinhala Buddhist schools, Tamil schools, Muslim schools, Tamil Christian and Sinhala Christian schools etc. Similarly, University of Jaffna caters exclusively for Tamils and the South Eastern University caters to Muslims while the Ruhuna University caters to mostly Sinhala students and the Eastern University caters to an overwhelmingly Tamil student population. Other universities cater to all ethnic groups and instruction is imparted in Sinhala, Tamil and English depending on different departments. However, as noted earlier, these seemingly multi-linguistic institutions are internally segregated based on the manner in which students finally opt to form class clusters, which generally follow the lines of segregation in the outer society and pre-university school system (Perera 1991). In a society rendered unstable as a result of interethnic conflict and the resultant manifestations of violence, more integrated schools could have been a site where aspects of the conflict ideally could have been effectively addressed. That possibility has been foreclosed as a result of Sri Lankan educational policy.

The training of teachers for the Sri Lankan school system undertaken by state organizations poses similar problems as those identified above. It is clear that most teachers in service today, are products of the segregated education system as are the students they are teaching. Moreover, they are also trained in institutions that are internally segregated except in the training of teachers specializing in subjects such as English. None of the teacher training institutions in operation today have seriously taken into account the need to train teachers who can teach in a context keeping in mind the challenges of a multicultural society (Perera 1992). There is a clear dis-juncture between current state policy towards interethnic relations and the manner in which teachers are trained.

Since the early 1980s, emerging scholarship in Sri Lanka had stressed upon the role school texts play in shaping interethnic relations in the country (Siriwardena *et. al* 1983, Perera 1991, Sama Shakti Guru Sanwada Sansadaya 1998). Ideally, school texts (eg., texts used for teaching religion, language, social studies etc) should portray the multi cultural reality of Sri Lankan society and address issues that are important in this context

while approaching the prescribed subject matter. School texts are written, supervised, produced and distributed by agencies of the state (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, National Institute of Education, Department of Educational Publications). This means that the contents of texts must necessarily reflect state policy or thinking.

In this context, an analysis of the evolution of both the process of text publication and the contents of texts over the years indicate that the text compilers have been interested in creating within the pages of these texts (particularly, texts used for teaching Sinhala language, Buddhism and Social Studies) a sense of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony (Siriwardena *et. al* 1983, Perera 1991). In this state of affairs, other ethno-cultural communities have been literally pushed into the margins of the texts or completely removed from them (Siriwardena *et. al* 1983, Perera 1991). Similarly, Christian and Islam texts create a relatively exclusive portrayal of their own religious communities without any reference to the Sri Lanka's multi-religious reality. Tamil language readers portray a very northern (Jaffna) centric sense of Sri Lankan reality, even though the kinds of explicit and ethnocentric references in the Sinhala readers are absent in these texts (Siriwardena *et. al* 1983, Perera 1991). In other words, ethnic politics are being played out in the process of text production.

In recent times some of more problematic contents in these texts have been removed in the process of revision and re-writing. Ironically however, in the social studies texts, this has gone to the extent of removing all references to ethnicity and related issues. This makes little sense in a country where ethnicity is a central issue but has also led to considerable political and social turmoil (Perera & Wickramasinghe 1999). Even so, in the most recent Sinhala Language Reader for grade 9 produced with World Bank aid, ethnocentric content with regard to Sinhala hegemony and minority phobia very clearly emerges in the very first lesson of the text (Sinhala 9, 1999: 3).

## **2.5 Interethnic Conflict and Employment**

Economically, "Sinhala only" legislation was a practical way to limit the employability of Tamils (and other minorities) and the English-educated elite of all ethnic groups. As apparent from the preceding outline, the conflicts with Muslims and Malayalis were triggered by economic grievances in economically depressed times.

During the colonial era and the early years after independence, the middle classes of both ethnic groups enjoyed conflict-free interactions as they did not have to compete for the same economic resources. Moreover, they were also educated in non-segregated English language schools, which gave them access to social networks cutting across ethnic and religious lines. As a result, at the time it was possible for the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala elite to work together to campaign for constitutional changes for Sri Lanka. The unity between these individuals gave an illusion of a real national consciousness (as opposed to an ethnic consciousness). But the vision of a unified Sri Lankan nation was held primarily by the English educated elite of both groups, and was not shared by the masses of either group, and in any case died out in its embryonic form soon after independence. While employment opportunities were available in the administrative, professional and mercantile services, middle-class inter-ethnic relations were cordial.

The situation did not deteriorate until employment opportunities started drying up after World War Two and soon after independence (Vittachi 1958: 98).

Though Tamils were over-represented in higher education and therefore in the administration and professions, it was the Sinhala who dominated the remainder of the wider economy like the lucrative plantation and business sectors (Samaraweera 1977: 97). To excel in these fields, competence in English or higher education qualifications were not required. One reason why the Sinhala were not vocal about their unenviable position in the administration and the professions was because of the availability of these modes of financial and social advancement. Some observers have suggested that when competition for state and professional-sector employment intensified, Tamils zealously protected their achievements precisely because they lacked deep roots in the wider economy (Samaraweera 1977: 99). On the other hand, as suggested by Wriggins, some colonial policies designed to encourage and induce entrepreneurship tended in the short run to favor minority groups like Tamils (Wriggins 1960: 310, Perera 1989: 17-18).

Indian Tamils living in the Kandyan Sinhala heartland added another dimension to the escalating problem. Initially, Indians were brought to certain parts of Sri Lanka by the British in the 19th century to work in the tea estates when the Kandyans refused to engage in such unattractive manual labor. The expansion of tea estates and Indian Tamil settlements caused a number of demographic and physical changes in the hill country which were to have chaotic consequences with the escalation of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict. First, the large scale and rapid influx of a group of people who were socially and culturally different to the deeply conventional Kandyans inhibited their integration. Though to some extent Sri Lanka had a tradition of assimilating new migrants from the sub-continent without dis-equilibrium (by creating new castes within the Sinhala caste system), the sheer numbers and the rapidity of this influx made prospects of assimilation impossible. In the 19th century the migration of these workers added a higher percentage to the total population than was added by natural increase (Samaraweera 1977: 98).

Second, when the British evicted the Kandyans from their traditional land to make room for the new Tamil settlements and estates, a class of landless Kandyan peasants was created, which was a totally new phenomenon. The growth of estates and Tamil labor settlements also circumscribed Sinhala villages in some regions leaving them little room for expansion. Because of these developments, the new arrivals were later seen as a problematic presence who denied the Kandyans employment opportunities and who were a contributory factor in the dispossession of their patrimony in land. The truly pitiful state of the new arrivals was never really seen or accepted by the Sinhala.

Even before independence, the Sinhala feared that Indian Tamil immigrants and local Tamils from the north east could form an alliance detrimental to the Sinhala. Kandyans demanded that the estate workers be repatriated so that they could occupy those positions (Vittachi 1958: 94-95). Sinhala fears heightened when repatriation talks with India failed and the laborers began to politically organize themselves under the Ceylon Workers Congress with a strong allegiance to India. A number of important legislative actions in the 1940s and 1950s were aimed at stemming the political clout of these

people by denying them citizenship rights. These actions created a new category called "Stateless Persons" (as India also refused to accept them).<sup>4</sup>

As Gunasinghe has pointed out, traditional patron client relationships in the allocation of jobs in the emerging market tended to favor young Sinhalas (Gunasinghe 1984). Youth leaving schools or universities had to have access to politicians in order to gain access to certain kinds of employment, particularly in the state sector. The economic system in force in the country from 1956 to 1977 has been described as a 'state regulated economy' (Gunasinghe 1984: 198). Gunasinghe has pointed out that in the context of this regulated economy, individuals with affiliations with the ruling Sinhala dominated political parties (UNP and SLFP) had better chances of success. That is, it was mostly Sinhala individuals with direct access to these political parties who were successful in getting the numerous quotas, licenses etc that were needed to carry out business (Gunasinghe 1984: 199). As a result, the "period of state regulation and import substitution provided the background to the upliftment of a fair section of middle level Sinhala entrepreneurs to the position of captains industry (Gunasinghe 1984: 199).

A similar situation was taking place in the expanding public sector as well. According to Gunasinghe, the system of political patronage was a significant factor in gaining access to employment in the public sector (1984: 199):

"The system of recruitment on political patronage also favored the Sinhala youth. Irrespective of the regime being UNP or SLFP, opportunities existed for Sinhala youth to build up patron client linkages with local politicians and press themselves forward. The Tamil youth, especially those of the north and the east, did not enjoy this advantage, as their local politicians represented regional ethnic parties, enjoying no power at the centre. Thus the expansion of the public sector was not merely an increase in the state regulation of the economy. It was, simultaneously an area of expansion of job opportunities for Sinhala youth" (Gunasinghe 1984: 199).

In the private sector, which mostly continued to work in the English language, employment opportunities for Tamils and other minorities remained relatively open. The expanding private banking sector in the post 1977 period did not favor any ethnic group, but generally those who were credit-worthy. In this sector also, the kind of discrimination that one could have expected in the state sector did not take place (Gunasinghe 1984). Today, as a result, some of the leading business ventures in the country are Tamil-owned.

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s the then President J.R Jayawardena granted citizenship to most of these "Stateless Persons" as a means of generating more votes for the UNP. Today, some of these people are government ministers while others demand a separate state for themselves in the hill country called Malaya Desam. In the 1980s and 1990s, some of them received covert training by some Tamil guerrilla groups.

However, as a result of the discrimination that has occurred in state sector employment practices over time, there is a tendency among many Tamils to perceive of themselves as generally discriminated against in employment.

Another dimension of the ethnic factor in employment linked to the patron client relations takes place in the state sector when members of parliament or particularly cabinet ministers representing minority ethnic groups form parts of coalition governments or simply happen to be members of mainstream Sinhala dominated political parties which form governments. In this setup, such ministers and members of parliament have adequate clout to find employment or even scholarships for members of their own ethnic or religious (and sometimes caste) group in state sector agencies that they control or have access to.

## **2.6 Interethnic Conflict and the Issue of Land**

The issue of ownership over and access to land has also been a consistent area in which ethnic politics in Sri Lanka have manifested, and have sustained themselves over the years. As already noted, one of the peculiarities in the demographic patterns in Sri Lanka is the relative concentration of certain ethnic groups in certain geographical regions.

The clearest site of politics of land and ethnicity has been in the sparsely populated areas of the dry zone in the North Central Province and the Eastern Province. Some observers have correctly noted that the “unfolding pattern of dry zone colonization has fuelled the ethnic conflict” (Tambiah 1992: 69). The opening up of the dry zone for settlement and irrigated agriculture commenced under British colonial rule. The dry zone areas of the North Central Province had special socio-cultural significance for Sinhalas in terms of their popular imagination of the past. It was an area where a number of ancient Sinhala capitals were located in a time considered as “golden era of Sinhala civilization.” It was also where many of the ruins of these ancient cities and citadels continued to be a source of pride to many Sinhalas.

When post independent governments decided to settle poor Sinhala farmers from the densely populated wet zone areas of the country, many Sinhala politicians and people in general viewed the process as a “reclamation and recreation in the present of the glorious Sinhalese Buddhist past” (Nissan 1996: 23). The so called colonization schemes became an integral aspect of the project of Sinhala Buddhist ‘nation’ building, which excluded from that process the participation of ethnic and religious minorities.

For many Sinhalas, the expansion of their presence in the north east seemed legitimate in the context of their understanding of Thesawalamai, the Tamil personal law in force in Jaffna. In terms of provisions in Thesawalamai, it was extremely difficult for ‘outsiders’ to buy land in Jaffna. Many Sinhala nationalists viewed these traditional laws as an affront to their dominance particularly in the context of post independence politics.

Not surprisingly, the Tamils had a completely different perception of the colonization of the dry zone. As Tambiah observes:

“given the ethnically preferential policy and the manner in which the Sinhala-Tamil conflict was developing, it was inevitable that Sri Lankan Tamils would see the massive migrations of Sinhalese into the Dry Zone as an intrusion into their alleged “homelands,” and as attempts to swamp them” (Tambiah 1992: 69).

The notion of the ‘traditional Tamil homeland’ became a potent component of popular Tamil political imagination. Since Sinhala settlements in the north central and eastern provinces occurred under direct state sponsorship, it appeared to many Tamils as a deliberate attempt of the Sinhala dominated state to marginalize them further by decreasing their numbers in the area. The colonization schemes did alter the demographic patterns, particularly in the eastern province in a significant way. According to some reports, Sinhala population which constituted 3% of the population in the Trincomalee District in the east in 1921 had risen to 30% in 1981. Similarly, Amparai District which used to be a largely Tamil and Muslim majority area is currently a Sinhala majority area.

The Ceylon Tamil Congress complained about Sinhala colonization in the north east prior to independence, while the same issue was a major preoccupation for the (Tamil) Federal Party from its inception in 1949 (Nissan 1996: 23). Tamil fears and concerns over re-settlement were recognized in the aborted Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact, where Prime Minister Bandaranaike observed that:

“The instrument of colonization should not be used to convert the Northern and eastern Provinces into Sinhalese majority areas or in any other manner to the detriment of the Tamil speaking people of these areas” (quoted in Nissan 1996: 23).

Nevertheless, such recognition did not translate into policy except at a much later stage. Despite this recognition, a decision was made after the UNP government came to power in 1977 to accelerate the development of the dry zone through what was called the Accelerated Mahaweli Program, a program, which provided for the opening up dry zone areas further for agriculture and resettlement of people. Only in 1986, as a result of continuing Tamil agitation, did the government agree to allocate the remaining land under the Mahaweli Program on the basis of the ethnic distribution of each ethnic group in the total population.

By the time the interethnic conflict had transformed itself into a military confrontation between the security forces of the state and various Tamil militant groups in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the great majority of Sinhala settlements in the North East had literally become an ethnic buffer zone between Tamil population centers in the north-east and Sinhala population centers in the south. Many of these settlements never really evolved into communities with cross cutting relationships with adjacent Tamil or Muslim villages. They remained ethnic ‘colonies’ in the midst of a mostly Tamil ethno-cultural and political terrain. This was the situation up to the mid 1980s despite the relative absence of violent conflict between members of these Sinhala settlements and Tamil villages. The resettled areas were clearly perceived in military strategic terms as an ethnic buffer zone by the LTTE and other militant groups. Since the 1980s, the

resettled groups have become regular targets of violent and brutal attacks by many of these militant groups, particularly the LTTE. Today many of these people have been internally displaced, and their properties in the area destroyed in sustained attacks by Tamil guerillas. The goal of these attacks was to eliminate the Sinhala presence in these areas and to destroy their infrastructure in order to prevent future resettlement. On the other hand, some of the remaining settlers have been armed by the state to protect themselves, which has also contributed to the escalation of violence in the long run.

In this context, it is significant that the devolution proposals proposed by the People's Alliance government (initially in 1995) has suggested that the issue of land would be a subject that would be dealt with by the regional councils, and that state land in the regions would be vested in the proposed councils. Nevertheless, even in the event of establishing regional councils, the issue of land, particularly the future of colonies already established must be clearly spelt. the absence of clear policy in this regard may lead to a further manifestation of ethnic conflict and violence in the future as regional legislature may opt to evict settlers given the memories and history of ethnic conflict which are not easy to forget at the level of popular perception or mass politics.

### **3.1 The emerging Ideas of Separatism and Loss of Confidence in Non-violent and Democratic Politics**

Divisive ethnic politics and fears of discrimination had led Tamil politicians in the direction of political autonomy or separation from a very early stage of recent Sri Lankan politics. Since the 1930s, and much more clearly since the 1950s, Tamil political parties have been asking for greater political autonomy for the areas in which they predominate. Such a devolution of power has been recognized at different times as a means to diffuse tensions between the two groups. A number of pacts had been formulated to define the modalities for devolution of power. In July 1957, less than a year after the 'Sinhala Only' legislation had been adopted by parliament, an agreement known as the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam Pact was agreed upon between Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the Leader of the Federal Party. Even though the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam Pact did not accept all the demands of the Federal Party nor provide for the creation of an extensive federal governing structure, it did offer a framework for regional devolution. But under relentless pressure from UNP dominated Sinhala nationalist opposition forces, the provisions of the pact were never implemented. It is generally accepted now that if the provisions of the pact had been implemented at that time, the interethnic conflict would not have reached the destructive proportions it has reached today. In 1965, yet another pact known as Dudley - Chelvanayagam Pact was formulated, and agreed upon between the UNP lead by Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake and S.J.V. Chelvanayagam of the Federal Party. But yet again the provisions of this pact, quite similar to the earlier, one, were never implemented, this time under pressure from SLFP led Sinhala nationalist forces. On both occasions the conditions under which the pacts were abrogated, indicated the general lack of political will on the part of national level Sinhala political leadership.

The failure to implement these proposals lead to Tamil demands for separation instead of federal type of regional autonomy they had been mostly seeking up to that point. On

the part of many Tamils, particularly Tamil youth from the north, the failure of these pacts also marked a disintegration of confidence in parliamentary politics in general. In 1977, the Tamil United Liberation Front won an overwhelming electoral victory on a highly charged political platform of separatism. In 1980, the District Development Council Act was passed in Parliament and elections to the councils were held in July 1981. But given the lack of government commitment to decentralization of power, this attempt also proved to be a failure. After this point, there were clear indications that the politics of Tamil society were going shift from the commitment to parliamentary democracy held by its conservative leaders to a commitment to armed struggle held by considerable sections of Tamil youth. In 1979, the government enacted the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act as a an interim measure, but in 1982 it was amended to be part of the permanent law.

### **3.2 The Continuation of Interethnic Conflict and the Emergence of Armed Conflict**

Until the early 1980s, inter-ethnic conflict was primarily limited to the political arena where destruction to property and life was minimal. However, even at this stage violence occurred on certain occasions such as in the passing of the “Sinhala Only” bill in 1956. The non violent opposition to the bill organized by Tamil politicians was disrupted by Sinhala crowds in what has been described by both academics and journalists as a riot, implying spontaneous mob action (Vittachi 1958). Similar violent incidents involving Tamils and Sinhalas have occurred in 1957, 1977, 1978, and the most violent and destructive of these took place in July 1983. Many observers see the violence of July 1983 as a turning point in the conflict.

In the light of recent interviews I would argue that none of these violent incidents in Sri Lanka were spontaneous riots in the strictest sense of the word. There was clearly popular and spontaneous participation. But I would argue that participation was facilitated by clear organization and planing at other levels such as is in the provision of transport for those who engaged in violence as well as delayed or no action to stem the violence on the part of the law and order apparatus. These tendencies were much more clearer in 1983 than on any previous occasion.

After the early 1980s such sporadic cases of violence gradually gave way to institutionalized political violence which became a main feature of the conflict. At this stage, organized or institutionalized political violence was widely utilized by both the political parties in power and Tamil youth who organized themselves into armed guerrilla outfits. This development marked the militarization and the steady brutalization of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict which has now reached civil war proportions and led to Indian military intervention in 1987.

The development Tamil militancy and its various manifestations have to be understood in the context of the Sinhala dominated Sri Lankan state’s inability to address the serious socio-political and economic issues which the Tamil minority faced. In many cases, these issues were directly linked to problems of language, and restricted access to higher education and state sector employment. Gunasinghe has argued in an influential essay that language policies and the patron-client relationships that emerged between Sinhala politicians and their supporters also paved the way for enhanced employment and

business opportunities for Sinhalas of whatever party affiliation at the expense of Tamils (Gunasinghe 1984).

The failure of parliamentary politics and the entrenchment of ethnic politics which led to frustration among Tamil youth eventually made some of these youth to organize themselves into armed groups for the ostensible purpose of seeking independence from Sinhala domination. The first of these groups was the Tamil Tigers which later came to be known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam or LTTE. In 1978 the Tamil Tigers carried out a series of bank robberies and also assassinated a number of police officers, many of whom were Tamil. Tamil police officers were specifically seen as traitors who were aiding in the process of Sinhala domination (Hoole *et. al* 1990: 22-23). Bank robberies and selected assassination of individuals within the Tamil community who were considered traitors in the initial period later led to massacres of Sinhala and Muslim civilians in the border villages and contested areas. By the 1980s, this phase in the evolution of political violence expanded to include indiscriminate bomb attacks in the Sinhala dominated south, particularly in Colombo, the capital.

A detailed social history of the Tamil militancy would sketch the processes which led to the emergence and entrenchment of political violence within Tamil society. However, my intention here is not to outline that process in detail which has been ably done by other writers elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> But it is necessary to identify some of its dynamics which directly led to the entrenchment of political violence in Tamil society. From its inception, the militancy was not a monolith. The splintering of the movement into various groups such as Tamil Elam Army (TEA), People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Elam (PLOTE), Elam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Elam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS) and so on almost from the beginning clearly indicate the ideological differences and different opinions in terms of strategy that existed among those who engaged in youth politics in the Tamil dominated north and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. Moreover, from the very beginning, the collective militant movement, whatever their institutional manifestations showed very little regard for democratic values or the routine rights of the very people they claimed to protect. In his recent book, Loganathan makes the following pertinent observation regarding the nature of the militancy:

“The distinction between ‘liberation struggle’ and ‘terrorism’ has become blurred. The armed struggle was never mass-based; it reduced people to the status of ‘observers’ or contributors to the coffers of the ‘sole protectors.’ Those among the ‘people’ who were inclined towards national reconciliation and accommodation were branded as ‘traitors’. In addition, the ‘battle’ was no longer against the state and its organs. Non-combatant civilians, particularly in the ‘border areas’ became legitimate targets” (Loganathan 1996: 189).

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<sup>5</sup> See *Broken Palmyra: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka, An Inside Account*, 1990 by Rajan Hoole *et. al* (Claremont: Sri Lanka Studies Institute) and *Sri Lanka: Lost Opportunities* by Ketheswaran Loganathan, 1996 (Colombo: CEPRA, University of Colombo).

Even though Loganathan's comments are directed specifically at the LTTE, the observations of other writers indicate that a similar situation existed among other groups from the very beginning of the militancy (Hoole *et. al* 1990). In a sense, Tamil society has faced three clear waves of political violence at extreme levels.

1. The first of these was the violence unleashed by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the context of ambushes and other confrontations with guerrillas. In such situations, members of the armed forces, unable to locate the invisible enemy constantly harassing them, aimed their guns on civilians populations. The detailed publications of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) documents much of the violence unleashed by the armed forces of the state as well as guerrilla outfits within Tamil society (UTHR 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1992, 1993, 1994).
2. The second clear wave of violence was from within Tamil society. That is, locally manufactured violence that was never supposed to be directed at the local populace.
3. The third wave of violence was the unprecedented terror unleashed by the Indian armed forces known as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) which landed in Sri Lanka in 1987 in keeping with the Indo-Lanka Accord which was supposed to bring peace to the island's war torn north east. Instead, it added a new dimension into the violence and prolonged the conflict. In the context of the escalating violence by the IPKF, the people in Jaffna renamed it the Innocent People Killing Force.

Currently, in the north-east theater of war, only the LTTE continues to fight the Sri Lankan armed forces. The other groups have either joined Sri Lankan forces to fight the LTTE which had attempted to annihilate many of them or have been eliminated by the LTTE. In fact as early as in 1985, the LTTE successfully eliminated the TELO (Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization) killing most of its leaders, and raiding their camps (Hoole *et. al.* 1990: 81-82). From its embryonic stage, the LTTE under its undisputed leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has not tolerated dissent or any semblance of plurality of political ideas. In fact, observers have noted that with the rise of internal killings and the emerging autocratic leadership of the collective militant movement, many of the more idealistic university students who initially joined such organizations, left them to engage themselves in other activities such as providing relief for refugees (Hoole *et. al.* 1990: 76-77). In addition to military and economic targets and dissenting voices within Tamil society, the LTTE has also consistently attacked Sinhala civilians in what has come to be called border villages, and in also in the capital by using indiscriminate bombing tactics.

### **3.3 Consequences of Interethnic Conflict and its Militarization: Issues of Trauma and Psychological Stress**

Some of the direct most visible consequences of the conflict are linked to issues of trauma and displacement. The psychological and social consequences of the conflict result primarily from the following conditions:

- A. Living in conditions of extreme violence for extended periods of time.
- B. Being involved in violent activities as in the case of guerrillas, including female and child cadres of the LTTE or as members of state military forces.
- C. Consequences of internal and external displacement.

In his recent book, *Scarred Minds: The Psychological Impact of War on Sri Lankan Tamils*, Jaffna based psychiatrist, Daya Somasundaram observes that mental health workers took a long time to comprehend the nature of psychological consequences of the evolving “civil war in northern Sri Lanka (Somasundaram 1998: 175). More importantly, he also observes that in the initial stages, these mental health workers did not “really possess the appropriate knowledge, training or facilities to tackle post traumatic problems on such a large scale” (Somasundaram 1998: 175). Somasundaram’s case studies clearly indicate the extent of trauma and resultant post traumatic conditions in the war affected northern Sri Lanka (1998). Many of these conditions have arisen as a result of directly experiencing violence such as torture at the hands of various Tamil guerrilla groups, Sri Lankan government forces or Indian Forces when they were operating in these areas in the late 1980s. They are also the result of losing loved ones in war or the result of physical injuries in war (Somasundaram 1998).

The manner in which the consequences of the conflict have affected children in the north east is ill understood. By 1993 about 400, 000 children had been displaced in the north and east due to the prevailing conditions of violence and instability (Marga Institute 1994: 60, quoted in Perera 1998). The Law and Society Trust in Colombo quoting from a UNICEF report notes that children in the region are seriously affected psychologically due to the trauma of war and displacement. Their observable symptoms resulting from the prevailing socio-political conditions included extreme sadness, fear, anger and irritable behavior, and lack of hope -- particularly in older and adolescent children (quoted in Perera 1998). In addition, an increase in physical symptoms related to stress has also been reported along with fear and difficulty in dealing with routine matters, withdrawal from routine activities at home and school as well as from other persons, and withdrawal into conflict related fantasies (Law and Society Trust 1996: 165, quoted in Perera 1998).

Available information also indicates that the LTTE actively recruits very young children into its fighting ranks. It is quite common to encounter children under 15 years trained in the use of fire arms who are also used in combat situations and for sentry duty. Observers have noted that in 1995 the recruitment of children into the fighting ranks of the LTTE intensified (Perera 1998). When over 200 LTTE members died while trying to overrun four army camps in the Weli Oya area in the east in July 1995, it was discovered that many of the dead were children (Law and Society Trust 1996: 167, quoted in Perera 1998).

Children living in conditions of constant military conflict and social instability resulting from inter-ethnic rivalry are likely to internalize certain ideas that would also be detrimental to interethnic relations in the long run. Thus it was no surprise that some

children in the Eastern Province who were randomly asked the question “what do you think of Sinhalas?” came up remarkably consistent terms of reference to describe Sinhalas: they are people wearing khaki, people carrying guns, they kill, they are loud mouthed (Perera 1998). Clearly, their perception of the Sinhalas was clouded by the reality of war that they faced every day.

Women are yet another group upon whom the violence would leave a serious psychological impact. This is the result of being exposed to the violence perpetrated by others (rape, war widows etc.) as well as being the perpetrators of violence themselves (e.g., LTTE female cadre). Rape was regularly utilized by the Indian armed forces in the late 1980s and the Sri Lankan armed forces as well (UTHR 1991b). Even after the current Sri Lankan government came to power with promises of peace and a flurry of peace negotiations with the LTTE, there are indications that rape of women in military controlled areas has occurred (WERC 1996). The best documented case of this nature was the rape and the murder of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy by Sri Lankan military personnel who was last seen near the Kithady checkpoint in the north September 9th 1996 (WERC 1996: 107-108).

The trauma of rape does not result merely from the act of rape itself. Much of it comes after the act in the way society reacts to rape victims. In conservative Tamil society which privileges notions of chastity, virginity before marriage and restrictive notions of purity, women are placed in an extremely difficult position when many of these notions would be violated in a situation of rape (Perera 1998). In these conditions rape victims are victimized by more than one aggressor. That is firstly by the rapist, and then by their own society.

Violence has been ritualized and glorified in some sections of Tamil society in the north and east particularly as a result of LTTE’s ideological and strategic considerations. This has also affected women quite significantly as the LTTE has expanded the military role of women within its organization. LTTE sympathizers have attempted to present the case of LTTE women fighters as an example of women’s liberation and a situation of acquiring equal status with men. Radhika Coomaraswamy, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, in a recent influential essay attempts to place this problem in context in the following words:

“I do not believe that inducting women into a fighting force is a step towards empowerment and equality. I believe that the recruitment of women into the fighting ranks signals the militarization of civil society -- a militarization which in itself is inimical to anyone who believes in human rights” (Coomaraswamy 1996: 8).

A similar situation of exposure to extreme violence exists among men as well. This includes both civilians and members of various militant groups, including state military formations. It is clear that particularly under LTTE leadership, a cult of ritualized political violence has been established within sections of Tamil society. This is clearly visible in areas under its control or in areas that have been under its control. The clearest manifestations of this cult of violence are the emergence of the suicide bomber who is willing to assassinate a complete stranger in the name of his/ her organization

and its leader. The other symbol of this process is the emergence of wayside shrines for fallen LTTE martyrs and the social significance of the idea of martyrdom within the organization (Perera 1998). However, as opposed to the availability of information on the psychological dimensions of the violence in the north east among children and women (civilians), information is vague about the psychological consequences of war among members of organizations such as the LTTE and state security forces.

On the basis of available information and the high rate of violence the conflict has ushered in, it is reasonable to assume that a serious mental health crisis exists in the areas most affected by war. This is the direct result of being exposed to violence as well as the instability brought upon by constant displacement and forced migration. Yet neither the state, nor groups such as the LTTE who control certain areas of the country, have an overall plan currently in operation to address such possibilities. On the other hand, given the relatively restricted access to mental health expertise and facilities in the country, addressing such issues even in the event of peace would become a serious issue. Hence, it is extremely important to understand this situation, and the challenges it may pose in any relief, rehabilitation of reconstruction program that may emerge in the future.

### **3.4 Concluding Comments**

The extent of militarization of the conflict and the scale of destruction in terms of lives lost and property destroyed have lead many Sri Lanakns to perceive of the conflict as having passed a point of no return. The rapid militarization it self is a consequence of the almost complete loss of faith in conventional politics experienced by many segments within Tamil society, particularly the youth.

This also means that democratic processes and democratic institutions have been seriously undermined over the years. In other words, democracy itself has been one of the most obvious casualties of the conflict. In this context, it is imperative to note that any future initiatives to address or resolve the Sri Lankan conflict has to take into account the need to build confidence in the system of governance, particularly in the democratic practices and institutions that have been subverted or dismantled. This is particularly significant in a context where Sri Lankan political parties in general (not simply in the north east) have accepted the dismantling of democratic practices as inevitable, and therefore acceptable.

In addition, the possible resolution of the conflict has to take into account a number of other long term priority areas that needs to be addressed. These would include viable mechanisms of peace building and reconciliation such as the education structure including school texts and teachers that could promote notions of multiculturalism, pluralism and democracy. Currently, this does not happen. The ethnic and religious bias in employment, particularly state sector employment also has to be addressed as a matter of priority. Employment should be a rational economic process rather than a process governed by dynamics of ethnicity and religion. The means to ensure the equitable use of national languages must also be taken into account particularly because language is one of the most emotive aspects of the ethnic conflict.

Currently, in military terms the conflict has entered a new phase. The government has had a number of serious military reversals in the Wanni area since November 1999 that has seriously compromised the security of these areas and their potential for development. Moreover, the LTTE has stepped up its bombing campaign in the city since December 1999, which includes an assassination attempt on the President and the assassination of a Cabinet Minister.

The recent military reversals and the entrenchment of the conflict has lead to a number of contradictory scenarios in both Sinhala and Tamil societies. In urban areas, particularly Colombo, Sinhala nationalists, generally not directly touched by the war have organized themselves into organizations such as the National Movement Against Terrorism and the Sinhala Veera Vidahana, whose collective aims include the continuation of armed action against the LTTE, suspension of possible peace talks with the LTTE, and in general oppose any political compromises that may lead to a cessation of conflict. This also means that these organizations and their supporters oppose the political proposals that the government has proposed to devolve power to the regions as a means of seeking a political compromise without giving into the demand for a separate Tamil state. On the other hand, in border areas, as recent fieldwork has indicated, Sinhala and Tamil villagers constantly and severely touched by the war are more interested in seeking a compromise political solution rather than the continuity of war.

LTTE on the other hand, and Tamil nationalist forces sympathetic towards its aims both within Sri Lanka and in Europe and North America are opposed to any solution other than a separate Tamil state. Moreover, the LTTE does not have a democratic agenda in any form at the moment as indicated in the low profile and stature of its political wing. This is particularly striking when compared to the influence and political capability of the political wing of an organization such as the Irish Republican Army.

The political commitment the government initially had towards peace soon after its electoral victory in 1994 has steadily deteriorated both in the context of the military reversals it has recently experienced and due to the pressure brought upon by influential sections within Sinhala society. On the other hand, the influence of non governmental organizations, despite specific work they have done, has been minimal in the larger scheme of peace building within the country.

In the context of the considerations above, the general assumption that cessation of hostilities and peace being only a distant possibilities entertained by many people seem to make sense. Yet, it is also clear that the conflict as it has evolved, cannot be resolved by any actor purely on military terms. That solution, irrespective of the ultimate shape it may take, will be situated in political compromise and vision of all the actors involved. However, at the moment, such vision and commitment to political compromise seem to be scarce resource.

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