

*one*

## **Introduction**

“It cannot be repeated too often that the present tragic situation is the product of specific historical circumstances, and not, as one often hears in Sri Lanka and in the international press, the end product of a 2,500-year-old struggle between ancient enemies.”<sup>1</sup>

The “present tragic situation” began to emerge only in the early twentieth century. It consists most importantly of recurrent violence and severe tension between the majority Sinhala population (75 percent), predominantly Buddhist, and the Tamil minority (18 percent), mainly Hindu, with a few Christians in both groups. More precisely, the conflict has most directly involved the indigenous “Sri Lankan Tamils” (12 percent), as distinct from the “Estate” or “Indian Tamils” (6 percent), whom the British started importing in the nineteenth century to work on the tea and coffee plantations. There is also a small population of Muslims (7 percent), who mostly speak Tamil but distinguish themselves by their religion and in fact continue to experience their own tension with parts of the Tamil community.

Ideas of exclusive communal identity and of hostile competition over questions of race, language, ethnicity, religion, and political control took shape between the Sinhala and the Tamils in the period leading up to 1948, when Ceylon, as it was then known, gained its independence from the British. Thereafter, some of the ideas were put into practice.

Conditions at the time of independence need not have encouraged intercommunal intolerance. The Tamil community was fairly small. Even though Indian Tamils were not satisfied with their lot, and some Sri Lankan Tamils had begun worrying about their future, Tamil interests might, under some circumstances, have been satisfied relatively easily. Moreover, many Tamils had lived in Sri Lanka from antiquity, frequently intermingling with the Sinhala majority and developing long-standing patterns of mutual accommodation and tolerance.

Unlike India's experience at the end of colonial rule, which included severe religious and ethnic animosity between Hindu and Muslim, Sri Lanka's transition to independence was comparatively calm. As the British departed, both Tamils and Sinhala were left in positions of authority. That was partly because the colonial educational system had produced an intercommunal elite with a shared language and common values and partly because, by training, the members of the elite had learned the art of political adjustment and compromise within the framework of a fledgling constitutional democracy.<sup>2</sup>

But appearance did not coincide with reality. Shortly after independence, there commenced a pattern of chronic intercommunal violence and hostility that has not yet been eliminated. The first major outbreak occurred in May 1958. The newly elected prime minister, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) he led, achieved power in 1956, with the strong support of Buddhist leaders, by campaigning for the primacy of Sinhala language, culture, and religion. The Tamils took offense. Inspired by Gandhi's campaigns of civil disobedience against the British in India, they mounted a series of *satyagraha* (civil disobedience) demonstrations to protest the new policies, only to provoke violent retaliation by the Sinhala.

In 1971 there was an outburst of violence that initially concerned only the Sinhala but that eventually had dire consequences for the Tamils. Economic failure caused severe unemployment, which particularly affected the youth of the

land. In response, Sinhala young people connected to a vaguely Maoist revolutionary organization called Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) assaulted police stations in parts of the island. Worsening economic conditions only exacerbated the plight of Tamil youth, who as the result of government policies had begun to find it more difficult than before to gain admission to programs in professional education and to find employment in the public sector.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the new constitution of 1972, drafted and adopted in the face of strong Tamil dissent, appeared to the Tamils to be a product of majority dictatorship and the cultural chauvinism of the Sinhala.<sup>4</sup> Although all other faiths were given equal protection, Buddhism was accorded "the foremost place," and the state was directed "to protect and foster" it. Equally contentious was the constitutional provision making Sinhala the official language, with the use of Tamil permissible by statute. For the first time various groups of Tamils united against Sinhala dominance, and Tamil leaders began to talk openly of secession.

The next instance of major violence, in August 1977, was also associated, like the outbreak in 1958, with a divisive national election. J. R. Jayewardene of the United National Party (UNP) displaced the SLFP in a landslide victory, paving the way for what the Tamils saw as further consolidation of Sinhala power at their expense. Though Tamils had strongly supported the Jayewardene ticket, and its promise of improved ethnic relations, they were soon disappointed. An incident in Jaffna "precipitated a ferocious outbreak of communal violence between the Sinhalese and Tamils . . . which spread to many parts of the island and bore comparison with the ethnic disturbances of the mid-1950s."<sup>5</sup> For the first time, Tamil youth, in retaliation, took up violence against the Sinhala.

With a substantial mandate from the majority and part of the minority, Jayewardene undertook to reorder and reshape national policy and to support new procedures for controlling the violence, which appeared to be increasing. Along with liberalizing the economy, he favored a Gaullist constitution,

adopted in 1978, which centralized power in the hands of the president. Although the constitution retained some features objectionable to the Tamils, such as still ascribing "the foremost place" to Buddhism, it did include certain concessions to the Tamils. It upgraded the status of the Tamil language and instituted proportional representation for parliament and direct election of the president, which appeared to provide more equitable representation. New government policies assured the Tamils easier access to university admission and allocated power at the local level in the form of district development councils. Finally, there was some hope that a more liberal, free-market economy might give Tamils a greater chance for economic improvement.<sup>6</sup>

However, several factors worked to counteract these concessions, preventing improved relations between the two groups. The government, internally divided over treatment of the Tamils, lacked resolve in implementing the new directives. The district development councils failed to become effective agencies of local control, mainly through lack of financial support. Finally, "Buddhism enjoyed a growing measure of expressive hegemony in the Jayewardene years," reinforcing the preeminence of Sinhala identity.<sup>7</sup>

Disillusioned and frustrated with what they regarded as halfway measures, and encouraged by the Indian government in Delhi and Madras, as well as by Tamil expatriates living in Tamil Nadu and in the West, some Tamil groups turned to violence, which, in turn, increased apprehension in the Sinhala community. In response, and in hopes of heading off civil war, the Jayewardene administration imposed stringent emergency measures, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979. This act became the basis for an aggressive and highly controversial campaign against the Tamils in the northern province.

Growing tensions between the Sinhala and the Tamils caused some sporadic outbursts of violence in 1981, and then erupted, devastatingly, in the riots of July 1983. These riots, principally centered in Colombo and the suburbs, exhibited unprecedented ferocity and destructiveness. Hundreds of

Tamils were killed, and thousands more lost their property and became refugees as the result of rampaging Sinhala crowds who were indulged and here and there incited by security forces.

The government's response to these distressing developments, including imposing more controversial emergency measures, only intensified polarization and enmity between the two communities. Things were further complicated by India's growing interest and involvement in the Sri Lankan conflict. Loyalty and common identity had long existed between South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils, and that connection began at the time to yield tangible support for the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka. But more than that, the Indira Gandhi government saw political advantage in providing support. The prospect of more than a hundred thousand refugees fleeing to India to escape the violence of 1983 reenforced Mrs. Gandhi's commitment to train and finance Sri Lankan Tamil guerrillas, as well as to help arrange a settlement that would, in her eyes, protect Tamil interests in Sri Lanka.<sup>8</sup>

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were the major beneficiaries of Indian intervention. Fighting for nothing less than a separate state, they raised the level of violence against government forces and Sinhala civilians, and eventually drove the Sri Lankan army out of the Jaffna peninsula in the north. But when, in 1987, the army attempted to regain control of the area, the Indian government objected, forestalling Sri Lankan efforts. India then succeeded in pressuring the Jayewardene administration, despite strenuous Sri Lankan popular resistance, into accepting the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement to Establish Peace and Normalcy in Sri Lanka, signed by Rajiv Gandhi and J. R. Jayewardene on July 29, 1987.

The agreement established the basis for a multiethnic, multilingual plural society, in which all citizens might live "in equality, safety and harmony." Tamil and English were identified alongside Sinhala as official languages. Administrative power was to be devolved to the temporarily unified northern and eastern provinces, which contained the majority of Tamils, leaving the final connection between the two

provinces to be worked out later. In addition, the agreement imposed a ceasefire, called for the Tamil guerrillas to be disarmed, and authorized an Indian peacekeeping force (IPKF) to implement the arrangement.

Initial reactions were positive. Tamil reception was at first enthusiastic, and for a while the government succeeded in subduing Sinhala opposition to the agreement that was staged especially by the JVP and the Movement for Protecting the Motherland (Mavbima Surakime Vyaparaya).<sup>9</sup>

However, the agreement soon collapsed, and was replaced, once again, by violence. The JVP could not long be contained, and they mounted a campaign of terror against those who sympathized with the agreement. For their part, the LTTE, who had not been included in the negotiations, took up arms against the Sri Lankan government and the IPKF, as well as against those among the Tamils who sympathized with the agreement.

As the situation worsened, Jayewardene's prime minister, Ranasinghe Premadasa, was elected president of Sri Lanka in December 1988. In reponse to growing Sinhala resentment toward the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement, Premadasa initiated talks with the LTTE, who were at the time weakened by their struggle against the IPKF. This interval enabled the Sri Lankan government to devote itself to an intensive campaign against the JVP. Aided in this endeavor by pro-government death squads, Premadasa succeeded in subduing the JVP by the end of 1989.

In addition, Premadasa negotiated the withdrawal of the IPKF, who were suffering unanticipated losses, and were beginning to lose interest in the whole operation. By March 1990, they were gone, though not before inadvertently strengthening the LTTE and thereby worsening the conflict. The Tamil National Army left behind by the Indians immediately collapsed, and with almost no effort the LTTE improved their position by taking possession of huge stocks of sophisticated weapons and supplies.

Thereafter, the conflict settled down into a relatively localized, if still expensive and bloody, civil war between the

LTTE and the Sri Lankan army in the northern and eastern provinces. In late 1992 there was a flurry of interest in working out a new peace accord by expanding the terms of the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement. By early 1993 there was some indication that government military gains had provided an incentive for seeking new talks with the LTTE. The LTTE, too, hinted they might be willing to compromise.

However, the prospects for resolving the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka have been obscured by the sudden assassination of President Premadasa on May Day, 1993, apparently as a consequence of an LTTE plot. Initial fears of Sinhala retaliation against the Tamils have not materialized, and the new president, D. B. Wijetunge, has professed willingness to enter into talks with the LTTE. But to date, the civil war and the growing number of casualties persist.