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ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA : FUTURE DIMENSIONS

Introduction

In the current literature, an ethnic group is broadly defined as a social collectivity which possesses, and is aware of, a distinctiveness by virtue of certain shared historical experiences as well as certain objective attributes such as race, descent, tribe, language, religion, dress, diet etc., a combination of some of which endows it with a differentiated character vis-a-vis other groups as they perceive it and it perceives them.¹ Since ethnic homogeneity within a state boundary is mostly a rare case² and multi-ethnicity has become a common character of most of the civic societies of present century, ethnic conflict and movements are posing severe systemic challenges to a large number of modern states. While inter-ethnic cleavages and competition always exist as fact of life in every plural society in a varied form, it assumes very critical shape in a polity and beyond when it takes the form of a separatist or secessionist move-

1. Urmila Phadnis, "Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia : A Case Study of Sri Lanka", *India Quarterly*, Vol. XXXV, No. 3, July-Sept; 1979, p. 329.
2. Tabulating states on ethnic basis, Walker Connor pointed out that at the beginning of this decade, out of a total of 132 states, only 13 could be described as ethnically homogenous. See, Walker Connor, "Nation-building or Nation-destroying ?" *World Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 3, April 1972, pp. 320-21.

ment. One such extreme case that attracts the present day world attention is the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka which seems to be getting increasingly complicated as time passes.

Sri Lanka is an ethnically diverse state. The island's geographical proximity to India, its strategic location on the East-West sea-route and the mercantile and territorial encroachment of the European powers contributed to the ethno-linguistic and religious make-up of the country.³ There are four large ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese are the largest group, and comprise 74 percent of the population (a great majority of these—69.3 percent are Buddhists).⁴ Next in size are the two Tamil groups—the Sri Lankan Tamils comprising 12.6 percent of the population and the Indian Tamils accounting for 5.6 percent of the total. The fourth group are the Muslims. They comprise 7.1 percent of the population.

The Tamil militants are fighting an armed struggle against the Sri Lankan armed forces with the aim of creating a separate Tamil state. On the other hand, counter-violence of the Sri Lankan armed forces in the Tamil dominated areas has brought the entire country on the brink of civil war. In the meantime, a number of abortive negotiation attempts has also been undertaken. The future of the conflict seems quite problematic depending on the outcomes of negotiations on the one hand and battle front on the other. It would also depend on the way in which the stakes of the conflicting parties are mutually perceived and accommodated. As the proximate power with vital ethnic interest, the role of India in resolution of the conflict also can not be overemphasized. The present paper aims at examining different dimensions of the conflict. Specific focus of the paper will be on : what factors contributed to the creation of the conflict ? What are the perceptions and stakes of the Tamils and what

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3. Satchi Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka : National Conflict and The Tamil Liberation Struggle*, Zed Book Ltd, London, 1983, p. 3.
 4. Central Bank of Ceylon, *Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka*, Kelaniya : The Vidyalandkara Privena Press, 1981, p. 12.

steps have been taken by the successive governments in power to accommodate the Tamil demands and why has this problem become so explosive in the recent past? What are the probable directions of the conflict? These are the among questions that will be dealt with in the present paper.

Genesis of the Conflict

The rift between the Sinhala and Tamil communities of Sri Lanka is rooted in their sharply conflicting perceptions of the island's history and basically different perceptions of the nation's identity.⁵ The claims and counter claims centre on establishing Sri Lanka as the traditional homeland of the respective parties and proving one another as the cause of racial conflict. The Sinhalese claim that a north Indian (Aryan) King, named Vijaya, came to Sri Lanka 2500 years ago and established his supremacy in the Southern part of the island. This invasion marked the beginning of the Sinhala race. But the Tamils take a different view of history. They claim themselves to be the original inhabitants of the island. Their argument is that since South India is much closer to Sri Lanka than North India, the Dravidians, not the Aryans, must have reached the island earlier. According to the Tamils, the ancient name of Sri Lanka is 'Eelam'. "As the claims were deeply embedded in their consciousness, the ethnic differences were always important in structuring of plurality in pre-colonial Sri Lanka, and indeed thereafter".⁷

Religion played (and still plays) a very important role in reinforcing the ethnic consciousness of the two groups. The Sinhalese embraced

5. A.G. Noorani, *Constitutional Framework For Sinhala-Tamil Accord*, paper presented at Workshop on "Regional Cooperation for development", organised by Centre For Policy Research, New Delhi, April 8-13, 1985, p. 1.
6. For Sinhalese and Tamils ethnic indentity, see, Satchi Ponnambalam, *op.cit.*, pp. 20-35, and P. Tharyan, "Ethnic Crisis : Tamils Deserve Autonomy", *World Focus*, September, 1985, pp. 11-12.
7. Vijaya Samoraweera, "The Evolution of a Plural Society," in *Sri Lanka : A Survey*, (ed.) K.M. De Silva, London, C. Hurst & Co. 1977) p. 86.

the Buddhist faith in the third century B.C. Myths tell the Sinhalese that Sri Lanka belongs to them and that they are the chosen guardians of the Buddhist faith. As G. Obeysekera has noted, "The myths are also an expression of the self-perceived historical role of Sinhalese as a nation".⁸ On the other hand, the Tamils retained their Hindu faith which prevailed in South India. For the Tamils in Sri Lanka, language and culture are the foremost elements of identity and not religion as it is for the Sinhalese. Although the Tamils in Sri Lanka have maintained their separate identity in terms of distinct linguistic and cultural separateness in the island for centuries the Tamil literary and cultural heritage of South India has been a source of inspiration for them.⁹

In retrospect, the Tamil-Sinhalese relations would have taken a different course if the post-independent rulers of Sri Lanka had deftly tackled the ethnic problem from the very beginning. Prior to independence, while the Sinhalese and the Tamil political elites had arrived at a constitutional settlement for independence and adopted the independence constitution as representing "the solemn balance of rights" between the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples,¹⁰ after independence the very first step taken by the Sinhalese ruling elites was to disenfranchise the great majority of Indian Tamils whose forefathers had been brought to the island from South India in the 19th century by the British to work in tea plantations. This measure was taken to please the Kandyan Sinhalese bourgeoisie who feared that extension of franchise to Tamil plantation workers would dilute their electoral strength. The measure naturally created a resentment among the Tamils against the Sinhalese ruling elites.

8. Quoted in, Ambalavannar Sivarajah, "*Problems of Minorities in South Asia: An Overview*"; paper presented at a Workshop on "Regional Cooperation & Development", organised by Centre For Policy Research, New Delhi April 8-13, 1985, p. 26

9. *ibid.*

10. Satchi Ponnambalam, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Following the citizenship laws of 1948, the All-CEYLON Tamil Congress split. One section remained in the Government and the other formed the Tamil Federal Party in December 1949. The TFP sought to unite the Ceylon Tamils, the Tamil-speaking Muslims and, more significantly, the Indian Tamils who were disenfranchised by the citizenship laws of 1948 and 1949.

Since the independence government-sponsored movement of persons from the densely populated south-west to the sparsely populated north-central and eastern "dry zone" has been another contending issue between the two ethnic groups. The migrants were mostly Sinhala, whereas much of the territory to which they migrated had been inhabited by Tamils and was viewed by members of the Tamil Community as their ancestral lands. The movement of Sinhala migrants into these areas was seen by Tamil political leaders as another effort by a Sinhala-dominated government to undermine the Tamil community by reducing its traditional lands.

1956, the year when Sinhala replaced English as the official language of Sri Lanka provided another landmark in the bitterness of Sinhala-Tamil relations. During British rule the Tamils fared well in various walks of life because they were educationally more advanced than the Sinhalas; their knowledge of English helped them to secure jobs in the government. Tamils were at a disadvantage when Sinhala was made the sole official language by the government of S.W.R.D. Bandarnaike. This action virtually forced Tamil government employees to study and work in Sinhala or leave employment. Tamil officers were given three years to learn Sinhala or face dismissal.¹¹

The discrimination was extended to the security services, public corporations and other services, and to the private sector, where proficiency in the official language was an obvious premium. In 1946 Tamils constituted 26.7 percent in the civil service and in 1978 the percentage came down to 5 only. Tamil citizens have argued that

11. A. Sivaraman, *op. cit.*, p. 34

due to the "Sinhala-only" policy, they are treated as aliens in their own land.¹² The Tamil Federal Party organized non-violent protests and satyagrahas in the late 1950s and 1960s. These political actions led to a series of riots.

The 1966 Language Regulations however entailed some modifications of the Sinhala-only policy¹³. But it could not bring any significant change in the overall situation. The following tables reveals the situation.

Table-1 : Ethnic Representation in State and Public Sector Jobs in Sri Lanka 1983

| State Sector (excluding Corporate Sector) | | | |
|---|---------------|--------|--------|
| Category | Percentage of | | |
| | Sinhalese | Tamils | Others |
| Professionals & Technicals | 82 | 12 | 6 |
| Administrative & Managerial | 81 | 16 | 3 |
| All Categories | 84 | 12 | 4 |

| Public Sector (State and Corporate Sectors) | | | |
|---|---------------|--------|--------|
| Category | Percentage of | | |
| | Sinhalese | Tamils | Others |
| Professionals & Technicals | 82 | 13 | 5 |
| Administrative and Managerial | 83 | 14 | 3 |
| All Categories | 85 | 11 | 4 |

Source : Sri Lanka's Ethnic conflict : Myth and Realities, Report of the committee for Rational Development (Colombo: Anand Press 1983) P. 2.

12. Robert N. Kearney, "Language and the Rise of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka", *Asian Survey*, May, 1978. p. 528.

13. S.V. Kodikara, "The Separatist Eelam Movement in Sri Lanka : An Overview", *India Quarterly*, April-June 1981, p. 177.

Table-2 : Recruitment in the Mediocre Posts of Various Government Departments in 1979

| Grade | Total Recruitments | Tamil Recutments |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| C.A.S. (open competition) | 140 | Nil |
| Assistant Station Masters | 98 | 4 |
| AMP Pharmacists & Radiographers | 480 | 7 |
| Survey learners | 318 | 5 |
| Sri Lanka Navy | 2170 | 146 |
| Graduate Teacher | 1000 (Approx) | Nil |
| General Clerical Service | 1000 (Approx) | 2 |
| Teachers | 17000 | 700 |

Source : *Ceylon Daily News*, July 7, 1979, p. 8. Quoted in Ambalavanar Sivarajah, "Problems of Minorities in South Asia: An overview" paper presented in workshop on Regional Cooperation & Development, organised by Centre for policy Research, New Delhi. 8-13 April 1985.

Higher education including admission to the Universities has been another issue on which the Tamils feel that they have been systematically discriminated by the Sinhalese. Sri Lanka Freedom Party led United Front government in 1970 introduced a new system of standerdization in admissions to the Universities. According to this scheme, a Tamil student was required to obtain a higher aggregate of marks than a Sinhalese student to qualify for admission.

The unfair restrictions imposed on Tamil youths in higher education and employment led to frustration and bitterness which, in turn, led to an alienation of young Tamils from the Sinhalese dominated government. Frustrated Tamil youths formed an organization called *Manavar Peravai* (Student Movement) in 1972 to protest against the new admission policy. This movement conducted several unsuccessful campaigns to press the government to alter the admission policy.

While the UF government, instead of redressing the grievances of the Tamil students, embarked on suppressing, the Tamil Youths retaliated in violent ways.

The inward-looking economic policies followed by the S. L. F. P. led United Front government in the 1970s created widespread discontent among the people¹⁴. As opportunities for public service employment dwindled due to economic stagnation, communal antagonism

The conflict is the product of deep-rooted apprehensions of Tamils that their community interests are threatened to be submerged into "Sinhalization" process.

between the two communities heightened. The Sri Lanka Tamil minority leaders who complained that the Tamils were discriminated against in state employment and higher education, particularly in University education, shifted their demand from autonomy to that of separation.

A new constitution was promulgated in 1972 by the UF government, which gave state patronage and protection to Buddhism and the Sinhalese language. The reaction was that different Tamil political parties, organizations and individuals banded together in a Tamil United Front (TUF) to demonstrate the cohesion and determination of the Tamil-speaking people in pursuing their demands and protecting their ethnic identity. In 1976, the name of the organization was changed to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the resolution, which was adopted by the TULF conference in May 1976, set forth a lengthy list of Tamil grievances against the government including that "the Republican constitution of 1972 had made the Tamils a slave nation ruled by the neo-colonial master; the Sinhalese who are using the power have wrongly usurped to deprive the Tamil nation of its territory, language, citizenship, economic life, opportunities of

14. A. Sivarajah, *op. cit.*, p. 34

employment and education thereby destroying all the attributes of nationhood and reconstitution of the free, sovereign, secular socialist state of TAMIL ELAM ... has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil nation in this country.¹⁵

It is thus evident that the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka is the product of deep-rooted apprehensions of Tamils that their overall community interests and socio-cultural and political identities are being submerged into the accelerated process of "Sinhalization" of Sri Lanka way of life. The Tamils feel that the Sinhalese who constitute more than 70 percent of the total population have been resorting to deceptive policies for the "colonization" of the Tamil areas. The Sinhalese by contrast have also a feeling that though they are the majority in their island, they are infact a minority in the greater Tamil Community stretching across India's Tamil Nadu state. The Tamils are really a dominant community if one takes into account the 50 to 60 million Tamils across the Palk strait, just 30 Kilometres away, with whom the Tamils have "special ties and whom they can count in their difficulties". The Sinhalese also think that since they have nowhere to go but in Sri Lanka their race and language could be preserved only in Sri Lanka. This fear complex has made the Sinhalese suspicious about even reasonable political demands of Tamils.

Perceptions and Stakes of the Tamils

As already mentioned, historically Sri Lanka has been peopled with two distinct social groups—the Sinhalese and the Tamils, who claim descendent from two distinct racial origins. The Tamils' general perception is that "they are a people with an equally long history and rights in the island as any one else".¹⁶ The Tamil Federal Party, which initially gave the leadership to the movement for pan-

15. Quoted in "Robert N. Kearny" *op. cit.*, p. 528.

16. Urmila Phadnis, *op. cit.*, p. 42

Tamil unity, in its first convention in 1951, stated their perceptions as follows:

"The Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon constitute a nation distinct from that of the Sinhalese by every fundamental test of nationhood, firstly that of a historical past in this island at least as ancient and as glorious as that of the Sinhalese, secondly, by the fact of their being a linguistic entity entirely different from that of the Sinhalese and finally by reason of their territorial habitation of definite areas which constitute over one-third of this Island".¹⁷

It is important to note that since independence in 1948 although the Tamil political leaders have always been keeping the above notion in their mind and are struggling against the discriminatory policies (as they perceive) of the successive governments, their perceptions and stakes have undergone several changes by this time.

In the parliamentary election of 1977, the TULF, the major political party of the Tamils contested seeking a mandate from the "Tamil Nation" to establish a separate state which would include "all the geographically contiguous areas that have been the traditional homeland of the Tamil speaking people in the country".¹⁸ The organization's election manifesto pledged that a constitution would be drafted by representatives elected to the national parliament from the Tamil areas and an independent state would be created "either by peaceful means or by direct action".¹⁹ In the election of July 1977, the TULF secured 17 of the 22 seats it contested, which led it to claim that the Tamils had voted for a separate state in the Northern and Eastern provinces. As the Indian Tamils do not live

17. Quoted in Robert N. Kearney, "Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement in Sri Lanka", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXV, No. 9, September 1985, p. 904

18. "Tamil United Liberation Front Manifesto, General Elections 1977", Quoted in Robert N. Kearney, "Language and the Rise of Separatism in Sri Lanka", *Asian Survey*, May, 1978 p. 533.

19. *ibid.*

in areas contiguous to the proposed Tamil state they have little attraction for the separate state Eelam. Moreover, their problems and circumstances differ significantly from those of the Sri Lankan Tamils.²⁰ Largely estate workers and generally lagging behind the rest of the nation in education, the Indian Tamils have been more concerned with questions of labour relations and citizenship than with education and white-collar employment.

Even the Sri Lankan Tamils are also faction-ridden and they have so many divergences that they are unable to come under a unified leadership. The factionalised Tamils hold divergent views which revolve around the objectives and strategies of their movement.

The composition of the TULF has always been very complex. There has been a conflict of opinions between the TULF leadership and the moderates on the one hand and youth organizations on the other. Until July 1979, the TULF leadership was committed unequivocally to a separate state to be secured by non violence.²¹ Even there were some moderates who believed that some kind of compromise formula could be found. But since 1979, the national climate has altered for the worse. The deterioration has been steep and pervasive. Communal violence erupted on a large-scale in August 1981, and in July 1983. By this time, TULF's representative credentials, established in the 1977 elections were being questioned by the militant Tamil groups which have come to the fore. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a group founded in 1978, were joined by other extremist groups (such as, the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam; Eelam people's Revolutionary Liberation Front; Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization: National Front for the Liberation of Eelam and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisers of Sri Lanka) which demand sovereign statehood for the Tamil areas

20. W. I. Siriweera, "Recent Developments in Sinhala-Tamil Relations," *Asian Survey*, September, 1980, p. 911.

21. *ibid*, p. 905.

and are committed to the use of terrorist tactics to secure that objective.²²

Irrespective of the differences, however, militant youth organizations and the TULF leadership have been working towards the same goal i. e., a separate state for the Tamils. The struggle is being carried out not only within the country but also outside. In 1983 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam submitted a Memorandum to the seventh summit Meeting of Non-Aligned nations held in New Delhi at which they appealed to the leaders of the third world to sympathise and support their freedom struggle of the Eelam Tamils. In the memorandum they mentioned that to achieve the revolutionary tasks of national emancipation and socialist revolution, their project aimed at the extension and transformation of their protracted guerilla warfare into a people's popular war of national liberation.²³

It is worth mentioning that among all the Tamil groups, the TULF is moderate and is favouring negotiation as the means of political solution of the ethnic crisis. They do use the demand for a separate state but it appears only as a bargaining ploy. They participated in the all party conference in 1984 and Thimpu talk of 1985. It is reported that after the Thimpu talk, the TULF is now holding out for a linking of the Northern and Eastern provinces as part of a regional autonomy arrangement.²⁴ On the other hand, most of the young militant groups are socialist-oriented and are committed not only to the separatism but also a socialist revolution. Divergences however exist among them also, so far as their strategies are concerned. Some favour a hit-and-run policy. As the president

22. Victor Gunewardena, "Impact of Internal Ethnic Conflicts on the Region", paper presented at an International Workshop on "The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace", organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka and International Peace Academy, New York, held at Dhaka, 23-25 November, 1985, p. 11

23. Satchi Ponnambalam. *op. cit.*, p. 262.

24. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March, 6, 1986,

of the Tamil Eelam liberation Front has declared: "Until we prepare for a direct war, we have to continue the guerilla war".²⁵ While the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam's (PLOT) strategy has all along been to prepare for an all-out military confrontation. The PLOT has disapproved the hit-and-run tactics employed by the liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and other military groups as counter productive. Umesh Maheshwaran, the president of the PLOT has viewed that a "military balance" between the Sri Lanka Government and the Tamil militants is imperative for meaningful political solution of the island's ethnic crisis.²⁶

As time passes, the latter perception seems to appear as the dominant and gaining momentum. It is important to mention that though the young militant groups (being pressurised by India) participated in the Thimpu talk, they did not cease from keeping the atmosphere hot in their own country. It also seemed that the bargaining tactics of the young militants were not to make proposals of their own but to insist upon the Sri Lankan Government to bring up the issue so that they can ask for something more.²⁷

Ethnic Policies of the Jayawardene Regime

Just after his taking over, President Jayawardene in a statement on Government policy declared on 4 August, 1977: "My government accepts the position that there are numerous problems confronting the Tamil-speaking people. The lack of a solution to their problems has made the Tamil-speaking people support even a separate state".²⁸ Accordingly, the Jayawardene regime adopted a number of measures to assuage the Tamil sense of grievances.

25. *IDSANews Review on South Asia*, Nov. 1985, p. 905.

26. *ibid.*

27. Mohammad Humayun Kabir, "Crisis Management: A Case Study of Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka", *Regional Studies* vol. IV, No. 1 Winter, 1985, p. 99.

28. A. Sivarajah *op. cit.*, p. 39.

The new constitution which was promulgated by his government in 1978, recognised Tamil as an associate national language throughout the country. Secondly, all the rights accrued by the regulations promulgated in 1966 and the Tamil language (Special Provision) Act of 1958, were incorporated into the constitution so that the rights of Tamils to be educated, to correspond with government institutions and to sit for public examinations in their own language became constitutionally guaranteed. The constitution also protected the right of any individual to obtain Tamil translations of Sinhala public documents. All laws and official reports were required to be published in both national languages. Provision was made for the use of Tamil in courts of original jurisdiction in the north and east. The constitution further removed the distinction between 'citizen by descent' and 'citizen by registration' (mostly Indian Tamils), which had been introduced by the citizenship laws of 1948-9.²⁴ After prolonged negotiation with the TULF, President Jayawardene also introduced a system of District Development Councils (DDCs) in 1982 which was designed to decentralise the power of the centre. Certain discriminatory provisions in admission to the Universities were also cancelled. But these policy measures could not satisfy the Tamils, because these were perceived as "too little and too late" and in any case were not adequately implemented.³⁰ For example, in the case of District Development Councils, the government, instead of decentralising power, further centralised the powers of the President and left the DDCs without adequate powers and funds. These measures thus did not go far in assuaging the sense of grievances of the Sri Lankan Tamil Youth, some of whom decided to opt for the path of violence in the mid-seventies.

It is important to mention that ethnic policies of the Jayawardene government has always been 'responsive' as well as 'coercive'. Along

29. C.R. de Silva, "The Sinhalese-Tamil Rift in Sri Lanka," in A. Jeyaratnam Wilson & Denis Dalton (ed.), *The States of South Asia: Problems of National Integration*, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, 1982, p. 1982, p. 169

30. Urmila Phadnis, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

with the above mentioned policy measures the government tried to win over the Tamil elites. The government invited the TULF to join the Cabinet of Ministers and subsequently to accept two posts as district ministers. But the TULF rejected the proposal. However, the government "succeeded" in persuading the leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) — the main political party-cum-trade union of the Indian plantation workers to accept a cabinet office which resulted in the CWC breaking away from the TULF and subsequently developing very close ties with the government.³¹ But, later the government began to move towards hardening the position. In July 1979, the government introduced the Prevention of Terrorism Act and declared a state of emergency in the Tamil areas. Attempts to overthrow the government by illegal means have been made offences punishable by death under the Emergency Regulations. An anti-terrorist group called the Special Task Force (STF) was trained. Since the violence was ever-spreading, this attempt could not achieve the expected result for the government. It rather accelerated the Tamils' alienation from the government.

It is important to note that President Jayawardene has been passing through a tough situation in contrast to his predecessors. Since the mid-seventies, the demand for a separate Tamil state had surfaced and terrorist acts increased largely. By this time several crucial incidents also took place. Communal riots in 1977, 1981 and 1983 undoubtedly widened the gulf between the communities and heightened the Tamil sense of grievance and victimization. With the changes of situation, it appeared that the government began to adopt more and more violent measurements. Indicating his government's stand and policies in the context of the deteriorating ethnic situation, President Jayawardene declared in the Parliament in 1984: "we have to combat 'terrorism' and defeat it with all the resources at our command. We may have to equip ourselves to do so at the expense of development and social and economic welfare plans."³²

31. W.I. Siriweera, *op. cit.*, p. 910.

32. Sri Lanka Parliament, *Parliamentary Debates*. Official Report, vol. 34, No. 1 (February, 1985), quoted in Robert N. Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 909.

The government however did not give up the persuasion and negotiation process. In 1984, President Jayawardene called for an "All Party Conference" (APC) to find out a path of solution to the ethnic issues. Principal points of discussion concerned devolution of certain governmental power and resources to sub-national units. The initial government preference appeared to be to make the country's 24 districts the major units for devolution. The Tamil leaders favoured larger units that could bring the Tamil-majority districts together in a single unit. Eventually, proposals were offered by the government for "Inter-District Coordinating Units" and for a second legislative chamber with members drawn from popularly elected District Development Councils. But the TULF rejected the proposal on the ground that there remained ambiguities of power and structure.³³ However, the government had compulsion also and the APC concluded without producing any concrete result.

Realising his domestic inputs inadequate in ending the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, President Jayawardene later admitted to Indian mediating role. In mid-June, 1985, he visited New Delhi and had talks with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Both of them agreed that immediate steps should be taken to bring the problem under control so that an attempt can be made to find a political settlement acceptable to all concerned within the framework of the unity of Sri Lanka.³⁴ As a result, both Sri Lankan Government and the Tamils agreed on a cease-fire agreement which was effected from June 18, 1985. The Government had also two rounds of talk with the Tamil representation at Thimpu, Bhutan in July-August 1985. The proposal for "sharing of power" presented by the Sri Lankan government at the talk was rejected by the Tamils as unacceptable as these were a virtual repetition of the earlier proposals which in substance meant only district councils and provincial councils with weak executive

33. Robert N. Kearney, "Sri Lanka in 1984 : The Politics of Communal Violence", *Asian Survey*, vol. XXV, No. 2, February, 1985. p. 259.

34. M.H. Kabir, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

and legislative powers highly dependent on the President.³⁵ The Tamils put forth four basic principles which they wanted to incorporate in any solution to issue. These were : (a) recognition of the separate national identity of Tamils (b) respect for the integrity of the traditional Tamil homeland (c) recognition of the right to self-determination ; and (d) citizenship rights for all Tamils who had chosen to make Sri Lanka their home.³⁶ Sri Lankan government viewed that Tamils' demand for the right of self-determination for a Tamil nation and the demarcation of 'traditional homeland' were

The government has used various strategies to bring Tamils into the mainstream of politics but it appears the actions failed to match good intentions.

inconsistent with and contradictory to a united nation, which was the premise on which the Thimpu talk started.³⁷ When the talk was continuing, news had reached of the reported killing of more than 200 Tamil by the Sri Lankan armed forces and the Tamil leaders walked out by making a statement that it was "farcical" to continue the peace talks when there was neither peace nor security for the Tamil people in their homeland.

It is thus obvious that the Jayawardene government has used various strategies to bring the Tamils into the mainstream of politics, but most of the steps have appeared to be too late and inadequate. Sometimes it also seemed that his actions failed to match declared good intentions. As a result instead of assuaging, the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka has taken the most gravisous shape in its history.

Likely Directions of the conflict

Within the next few decades the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka, as Jeyaratnam Wilson, a keen observer of Sri Lanka political scene has

35. B. Udayshankar, "Thimpu Talks on Lanka's Ethnic Problem-Round 1," *Strategic Analysis*, vol. IX, No. 6, September, 1985, p. 566.

36. *ibid.*

37. *The New Nation*, July 22, 1985.

forecast, "will determine whether the island is destined to be involved in the continuing haemorrhage of a Lebanon or Ulster-style interne-cine civil war, or whether it might end up dividing itself into two separate mini-states."³⁸ In the context of the recent rising tide of violence in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, the above apprehension seems likely to be justified. Following the unfruitful Thimpu talks (Round I & II) of July-August 1985, the Tamil militants have formally withdrawn the ceasefire agreement and again adopted the path of violence. They are unrelenting in their demand for separate Tamil state and they are convinced that it is only through the violent struggle that they could secure their objective. On the other hand, what the Jayawardene government seems likely to concede is, at best, to set up a 'provincial' council with very modest legislative powers which is, evidently far distant from the Tamils' demand.³⁷ At the same time, the government is determined to "carry through the settlement by force; being brutal if necessary, with all dissenters."⁴⁰ It is reported that the government has again started to adopt both the methods simultaneously which consequently have enveloped and surfaced the political environment of Sri Lanka in the uncertainties.

Now the most pertinent question is whether there is any possibility of disintegration of the island in near future. As already mentioned, there are several factors which have been contributing to the increase of Tamil sense of grievances and their secessionist attitude for a long time. Youth militancy, which is the main threat of separatism is largely a reaction to organised communal violence directed against Tamils by racist mobs in 1956, 1958, 1961, 1977, 1981 and again on a bigger and more disastrous scale in July 1983. Today ethnic situation in Sri Lanka has deteriorated to an extent of total alienation

38. A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, "Sri Lanka and its Future: Sinhalese Versus Tamil" in Wilson & Dalton (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 295.

39. *The Bangladesh Observer*, March 19, 1986,

40. Qadri Ismail, "Sri Lanka: Constraints on a Solution", *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 17, 1985. p. 1384.

of the Tamil population. There is genuine and widespread feeling that "the two races can never live as partners in a united island—a fact which the political elites of the ethnic Sinhalese majority are unwilling to acknowledge."⁴¹

While these are the facts and it is today's reality that Sri Lanka is faced with a secessionist threat of serious proportions, there are other factors too, which seem to belie any possibility of disintegration of the island in near future.

As an analyst has rightly pointed out, for ethnic nationalities to succeed in forming separate states of their own, at least one of the following two conditions would have to be met :

(a) A total breakdown of the centre accompanied by substantial nationalistic and anti-centre activities in the minority areas ; (b) A commitment by a superior external power on behalf of the ethnic separatist groups without countervailing response on the part of other major powers in support of the centre.⁴²

In the case of Sri Lanka, the following points may be noted in this connection. First, according to the separatist Tamils, Eelam (the separate Tamil state) will comprise Jaffna Peninsula, northern province districts of Mulativu, Mannar and Vanaiy and the eastern province district of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai. Though the Tamils are a majority in the districts of the northern province, they form a majority in only one of the districts of the eastern province—Batticaloa and their province-wide number is only 42% (Sri Lankan Tamils are only 21.3).⁴³ While for the rest, the Muslims make up 32% and the Sinhalese, 26%. It is also a fact that Sri Lanka's Muslims form a distinct cultural and social entity. They have not been much interested in Eelam among either eastern Muslims

41. Jeyaratnam Wilson, D. Dalton, *op. cit.*, p. 298

42. Zalmay Khalilzad, "The Politics of Ethnicity in Southwest Asia : Political Development or Political Decay ?", *Strategic Studies*, vol. VII, No. 3, Spring 1983, p. 63.

43. Qadri Ismail, *op. cit.*, p. 1384

or Tamils.⁴⁴ The Muslims are even reluctant about the merging of eastern and northern provinces into a regional unit as proposed by the TULF.⁴⁵ They feel they would lose political status or influence. Now, since the Muslims and Sinhalese outnumber the Tamils in the east, it is a disadvantageous position for the Tamils. It is also important to note that during 1977 elections, while the TULF swept the north, its performance in the east was far less impressive.

Second, due to geographical proximity of the different parts of the island, the Sri Lankan government is in an advantageous position to check separatist attempt launched against the centre. It is needless to mention that the Sri Lankan government will never concede the demand for a separate Tamil State.⁴⁶

Third, the Tamils are factionalised. Today there are about 30 groups of young Tamil militants in Sri Lanka.⁴⁷ They lack not only a united leadership but also a common stand. Their perceptions are contradictory to one another. Moreover significant difference exists between the young militants and the moderate TULF. TULF, the largest organization of the Sri Lankan Tamils, as already mentioned, is now holding out for a linking of the Northern and Eastern provinces as part of a regional autonomy arrangement, while the militants are preparing themselves for all out war against the Sri Lankan armed forces.

Fourth, So far as the external assistance for the separatist Tamils' demand is concerned, Indian involvement in the crisis comes first. Because India presently is considered as an "essential party to the sovereign Sri Lanka's problem of nation-making".⁴⁸ In the context of Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, Tamil Nadu state of India has great

44. *ibid.*

45. *ibid.*

46. P. Tharyan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

47. Victor Gunewardena, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

48. Rukhsana A. Siddique, 'Ethnic Strife in Sri Lanka and the 1971 Insurrection,' *Regional Studies*, Vol. III. No. 2. Spring 1985, p. 75.

significance due to (a) its geographical proximity to Sri Lanka ; (b) the Indian Tamil population of Sri Lanka which comprises the disenfranchised plantation workers and has distinct social, ethnic, linguistic and historical ties with the inhabitants of Tamil Nadu ; and (c) a distinct similarity in the linguistic and cultural domination by a powerful majority. That is why any anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka, always have serious repercussions in Madras, the capital city of Tamil Nadu. It is reported that the Tamil militants are trained up in Tamil Nadu and they are supplied with arms from the same source.⁴⁹ This, no doubt, seemed to be a great advantage sign for the Tamils separatist movement.

Although the encouragement and support which the Tamils get from the Tamils in Tamil Nadu are deepening and exacerbating the Sri Lankan crisis, there are sufficient logic behind the speculation that India will not want Sri Lanka to break up. India itself is preoccupied with her own ethnic problems in Punjab and Assam. Moreover, any disintegration in Sri Lanka on the basis of ethnicity will necessarily have a negative impact on the ethnic situation of India. Recently Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has thus categorically mentioned that India is interested in one united Sri Lanka in the form of a government that the people of Sri Lanka want.⁵⁰ It is also noted that even after the two rounds of the Thimpu Talks, the Indian government is unfailingly continuing the "good offices" it offered bringing the two sides together for a peaceful political settlement.⁵¹

In spite of all the uncongenial factors to separatism, the nervousness and paranoia with which the Sri Lankan government has been responding to the demand of a separate Tamil Eelam and also to the armed tactics of the Tamil guerillas, however, indicate that the future of this ethnic-torn island still remains uncertain.

49. Victor Gunewardena, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12

50. *IDSANews Review on South Asia*, November, 1985

51. M.H. Kabir, *op. cit.*, p. 101

As mentioned earlier, the dominant perception which is prevailing now among the militant activists of Tamils is that "violence" and "military balance" is only means through which their objective would be achieved. Position in the battle front will determine to what extent the Sri Lankan government will be submissive and concede their demand. Since by this time the young militants have shown their survival strength and the government has been compelled to recognise their legitimacy through the Thimpu talk, their further advancement to the same direction is not unlikely to be seen. It is also important to note that the strength of the fighting elements of Tamils is about 6,000 while that of Sri Lankan army is about 16000.⁵² The ratio is more than 1:3. Moreover, guided by nationalistic zeal, they are succeeding quite well in their hit-and-run tactics. It is also reported that the Tamils are increasingly acquiring arms from as many diverse sources as possible. North Korea and Palestine Liberation

The possibility of intrusion of external powers in the troubled waters of the ethnic-torn island poses a destabilising threat to the south Asian regional system.

Organization (PLO) are also included in the list of arms suppliers.⁵³ Trying to face the continuous violence and to meet any contingency, the Sri Lankan government is also seeking assistance from Israeli Mossad-anti-terrorist commandos and the British mercenaries. Other recent developments include Chinese assurance of training the Sri Lankan Air Force, and providing it with sophisticated night

52. See, Robert N, Kearny, *op cit*, p. 260. and *Military Balance*, 1985-86, IISS, London p. 134.

53. Lok Raj Baral, "Political Demography and Security in South Asia", paper presented at the International Seminar on "Regional Security in South Asia", sponsored by Centre For Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal, November 3-6 1985, p. 42.

surveillance capability, American assistance to help combat the terrorists by augmenting the sea patrol around the island. Sri Lanka's recent military ties with Pakistan have caused deep anxiety in India which may further complicate the situation. Recently, India has officially expressed her concern about these recent developments.⁵⁴ An observer has pointed out : "And in situation when the concerned ethnic group tends to draw support, material as well as moral, from its contiguous ethnic group across the state, the domestic ethnic conflicts acquire a transboundary dimension. These conflicts can get further defuddled by the transregional dynamics of the role of expatriates and also of extra-regional powers."⁵⁵ Naturally such an abnormal situation in the island republic of Sri Lanka may lead to the intrusion of external powers. It may in the long run thereby affect the South Asian regional stability.

54, *The Daily Ittefaq*, Dhaka, March 20, 1986

55, Quoted in Lok Raj Baral. *op. cit.*, p. 43.