CHAPTER-III
ROOTS OF TAMIL MIGRATION FROM SRI LANKA

Every human society is bound to contain some degree of violence, which seems to be one of the most fundamental states of human nature. Violence has remained a constant and universal feature in the socio-political processes of all human societies, and has erupted periodically, in various parts of the world from the times of the first civilizations up to today. In today’s world, tactless government policies, and prolonged delays in redressing political, economic and other grievances, are some of the various sources of violent actions, and the situation in Sri Lanka is one of those clashes in recent times.

Ethnicity as a concept has existed from the beginnings of human civilization. In ancient times, groups or communities were constituted on the basis of kinship ties. The word Ethnic is derived from the Greek term ‘ethnos’ meaning ‘Pagans’ or ‘others’. This term, ‘ethnos’, was used to describe the non-Greek barbarians who were perceived as the ‘other’ or as not belonging to the local community. Moreover, the term ‘ethnos’ was used as a counterpoint for the term ‘genus’, meaning family, which was used to describe the Greeks themselves. Obviously, the distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ forms an essential part of human identity, and has been a basic premise of the whole discourse on ethnicity from ancient times onwards.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE SRI LANKAN CRISIS

Such perceptions of us/them, self/other dichotomies of ethnicity have not been historically absent in Sri Lanka, although matters did not come to a head until the post-independence era. The Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups have always seen as mutual enemies. To the Sinhalese, historically, the Tamils are the ‘alien other’ who have to be opposed to protect the ethnic and racial identity, and vice versa. Both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism were a result of the naturally existing
competition for the scarce resources of any nation. The self and other images however, assumed a much more serious form when they became associated with social and political interests, and the emergence of Sinhala nationalism created a corresponding rise of consciousness among the Tamils of their own ethnic identity.

The Pre Independence Tamil leadership had been attracted to the pluralist vision of nationhood. They regarded themselves as Ceylonese over and above any other identity, and accepted the fact that the post independence state would be a multi-ethnic one. However, post independence developments show a clear use of political power manipulation to allow additional benefits to one community to the detriment of the interests of another. In Sri Lanka at least, the process of assertion of their ethnic status and identity by the two communities could have been better handled. More accommodating policies on part of the Sri Lankan state would have ameliorated the degree of ethnic conflict caused by such emergences. In fact, it is clear now that there has been a total failure of mature statesmanship in Sri Lanka.

In any ethnic conflict, anywhere in the world, the state usually emerges as a major party to the problem. The institutions of the state are the first to be challenged in the process, and it is at this level that the maximum use of ethnic rhetoric is usually made. Ethnic conflicts have come to be increasingly viewed as a result of the loss of legitimacy of the state and its failure to control and mitigate the discontent among the various groups. The increasing domination of the state machinery by members of one particular group of the exclusion of others becomes the chief cause of this loss of legitimacy. This is equally true of the crisis in Sri Lanka as well. The emergence of Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka is a direct reaction to the concretization of the Sinhala identity and their increasing chauvinistic control over the state machinery.

**COMPOSITION OF ETHNIC GROUPS IN SRI LANKA**

Sri Lanka is composed of three major ethnic communities. The Sinhalese, who are the majority community, constitute about 74% of the total population.
The Sri Lankan Tamils constitute about 7% of the total population\textsuperscript{1} and the Muslims who trace their origin to the Arab, Persian and Malay merchants who came to Sri Lanka to trade and eventually settled there. Most of the Muslims speak Tamil too, though they do not play any major role in the conflict. They do, however, seek to protect their own interests. The remaining population is composed of the Burghers who comprise less than 1\% of the total.\textsuperscript{2}

The ethnic groups involved directly in the conflict are the Sinhalese and the Tamil, who consider themselves to be completely different from one another on the basis of their religious, linguistic and racial characteristics. The Sinhalese claim an Aryan descent and trace their origins to the north-eastern parts of India. They are mostly Buddhist though a minority among them is Catholic. The mother tongue of the Sinhalese is the Sinhala language, which is of Indo-European origin.

The Tamils, on the other hand, are assumed to be Dravidians in origins, and trace their descent to original inhabitants of South India. They are generally Hindus, though some of them are Muslims or Christians as well, and they speak the Tamil language. The Tamils in Sri Lanka are in turn divided into two categories. There are the Sri Lankan Tamils, who compose about 12\% of the total population, and the Indian Tamils, who are about 6\% of the population and were brought to Sri Lanka from India by the British from 1925 onwards to work on the tea and coffee plantations.

The Sri Lankan Tamil consider themselves to belong to Sri Lanka and to have a claim to the land. This brings them into direct conflict with the Sinhalese who also consider themselves to rightfully belong to the land. These ‘self’ and ‘other’ images are portrayed at three different levels in Sri Lanka. The religion-racial-linguistic sense of identity and distinctiveness is prominent.\textsuperscript{3}

The ethnic conflict as it has manifested itself today may lead one to believe that the Sinhalese and the Tamils have been historically in conflict with one another. The Sinhalese are projected as the defenders of Buddhism from the
non-Buddhist invaders. However, the Sinhala-Tamil conflict is a relatively recent phenomena manufactured by the twentieth century elite. From the beginning of the century, the elite indulged in ethnic mobilization and ethnic polarization. The intensity of the conflict in Sri Lanka today can be understood by understanding some of its historical antecedents, most of which are used to develop myths that stoke the conflict.

**Ethnic Conflict and Separatism in Sri Lanka**

Although ethnic tension and conflict in post independence Sri Lanka has found its main expression along the Sinhalese–Tamil divide, other dimensions and cracks do exist in the ethnic mosaic constituting Sri Lankan society. There have been clashes between Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese Christians, Tamil Hindus and other similar configurations, and so on. Most notably, however, the Muslims have, since the mid 1980s, been drawn into the ethnic conflict on progressively larger scale.

Among those groups, the three that are the most involved in the political process of power sharing are the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims, while the others groups make virtually no impact. The major antagonists however, are the Sinhalese and Tamils who are engaged in a deep rooted clash of ethnic identities based not only on language but on religion, ancestral territory, memories of a unique collective history, and a wide range of cultural attributes.

Ethnic identities are very strong in Sri Lanka. Every permanent inhabitant belongs to one and only one of the ethnic compartments into which the population is divided.

Secondly, communal considerations and the Sinhalese-Tamil animosity structure public policy decisions too, whether in matters affecting economic development or in the fields of defence, foreign policy, etc. Communal thinking is a silent partner in the decision making process for all public policy on the island.
The sites for public works for development have been chosen with a view to favouring the Sinhalese as opposed to the Tamil areas; top officials in the state security forces have often been removed if they were Tamils, in the post independence era, and replaced by Sinhalese. Some Tamil diplomatic officials have been virtually subjected to loyalty tests before they are sent abroad.

Thirdly, the rift between the Sinhala and Tamil communities of Sri Lanka is rooted in their sharply conflicting perceptions of the island’s history and the basically different perceptions they have of the nation’s identity. The claims and counter claims of the two groups centre on establishing Sri Lanka as the traditional homeland of the respective parties and proving the other as the cause of the persistent 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 is noted by them as the beginning of the Sinhala race. But the Tamils take a different view of their national history. They claim 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 first. According to the Tamils the ancient name of Sri Lanka is “Eleans”. As these mutually conflicting claims are deeply embedded in their consciousness, the ethnic differences have always been an important part of structuring the plurality of pre-colonial Sri Lanka and thereafter.

Religion has played (and still plays) a very important role in reinforcing the ethnic consciousness of the two groups. Myths tell the Sinhalese that Sri Lanka belongs to them and that they are the chosen guardians of the Buddhist faith. As Gananath Obeyesakere points out, “the myths are also an expression of the self-perceived historical role of the Sinhalese as a nation. On the other hand, the Tamils have retained their original Hindu faith which their ancestors had practiced 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 a distinct linguistic and cultural separateness on the Island for centuries, the Tamil literacy and cultural heritage of South India has always been a source of inspiration for them.¹²

Therefore, the Sinhalese as a collective regard themselves as the rightful owners/occupants of the Island, with the Tamils and other groups seen simply as minorities living there by the sufferance of the Sinhalese. The country belongs to the Sinhalese in a way in which it does not belong to the Tamils or others numerically inferior groups, according to their way of thinking. The Tamils, on the other hand, view themselves as equal partners with the Sinhalese, and even their superiors in cultural matters, and regard the country as belonging to them too. They concede their numerical inferiority to the Sinhalese but demand their right to complete equality, on the basis of merit, for participating in the policy making process, in business and in profession. There is a fundamental discrepancy in these two sets of perceptions. To the Sinhalese, Sri Lanka is a land of the majority nation the Sinhalese – whose leaders will set national policy affecting the country as a whole. The interests of the minorities might be taken into account in the setting of such national policy by them, but it is the Sinhalese view of the national good which must prevail. To the Tamils, to the contrary, Sri Lanka is a land of two nations – the Sinhalese and the Tamils,¹³ and while they themselves may be smaller in number, national policy making must be shared by the leaders of both nations. It should, further, be guided by the interests and functional capabilities of the two nation rather than by the proportionality of their numbers.

The Language Issue in Sri Lanka

An important issue in early Sri Lankan politics was that of national language. English was the state language at the time. However, the Sinhala-educated intelligentsia and the Buddhist clergy insisted upon Sinhala being
declared the only national language of the country. However, the UNP government of Sir John Kotewala (1935-65) took the position that Sinhala and Tamil would be given parity as national languages after English had been phased out. After initially supporting the idea of parity, the main opposition party (the SLFP) changed course and in the 1955 began advocating the primacy of Sinhala. On the other hand the principle of parity put forward by the UNP government was supported by the left parties, the Lanka Sama Samaj Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party.

The 1956 ‘Sinhala Only’ Bill

The introduction of the Sinhala language bill in June 5, 1956 by the Bandaranayake Government, declaring Sinhalese as the national and official language of Sri Lanka\textsuperscript{14} was responsible for the beginning of the deterioration of the social and economic life of the Tamils, who began to lose out on employment opportunities in the government. Civilian officers were also compelled to take Sinhala language examination in order to be eligible for promotions. The “Sinhalese only” language policy passed into law as the official language net no. 33 of 1956 on the 7\textsuperscript{th} of June 1956.\textsuperscript{15}

The law had completely different effects on the two communities in the country. For the Sinhala people, the “Sinhala only” demand had reflected their aspirations to retrieve their cultural heritage, and to reassert their position and prerogatives as the majority of the Island’s population. Tamil citizens have argued that due to the ‘Sinhala only’ policy they are treated as aliens in their own land.\textsuperscript{16} For the Tamils of Sri Lanka, the ‘Sinhala only’ act was a disaster. They had always had a commitment to their ancient language that went deep in their national consciousness. Their language, as is the case with most ethnic groups, was a definition of their identity and status as a people, the most powerful symbol of the antiquity of their race and the repository of its culture and history.\textsuperscript{17}
The proclamation of the official language act resulted in communal riots of an unprecedented nature in which many lives were lost in both Sinhalese and Tamil communities, although the Tamils suffered a greater loss by virtue of their large presence in Sinhalese areas at the time of the riots. The 1956 riots were the first of a series to which the Sri Lankan Tamils and those of Indian origin were subjected because of the “Sinhala only” policy and the 1956 language act which divided the people on national ethnic lines. The ethnic problem was soon to escalate and dominate the policies of the country. During this period, the federal party organised active resistance to the government’s language policy and announced a further Satyagraha campaign for the purpose, timed for August 1957. The Prime Minister tried to prevent this campaign by coming to an agreement with the leader of the federal party, J.J.U. Chevanayakan, on 26 July 1957.

The agreement was popularly called the B.C. Pact.\textsuperscript{18} Under the “B.C. Pact”, the Satyagraha was abandoned, and Tamil was to be recognised as the language of a national minority and named the language of administration in the northern and eastern provinces, with provision for regional councils with powers over education, agriculture and the selection of persons for colonization schemes. But as a result of violent agitation by the militant Buddhist groups, the pact was scrapped and in 1961, the language of the courts act was passed providing for the progressive substitution of Sinhala for English in court proceedings.

Matters worsened far more when the 1972 constitution did away with the safeguards for minorities in the original constitution.\textsuperscript{19} This constitution further alienated the Tamils from the Sinhalese as it reiterated that Sinhalese would be the sole official language and the regulations passed under the Tamil language special provisions act would be considered as subordinate legislation.\textsuperscript{20} The federal party strongly resented these provisions and decided to boycott the constituent assembly and declared that the Republican Constitution of 1972 did not have the sanction of the Tamil people.\textsuperscript{21} The constitution which aimed to build a nation in a plural
society “even more conscious of its oneness amidst diversity”, made the ethnic
groups feel even more conscious of their diversity.\textsuperscript{22}

Mrs. Bandramaike’s second term as Prime Minister marks the complete
break of the Tamils from the Sinhalese. The nation was prevented from breaking
up till 1970 because – whereas on the one hand the Sinhalese leadership sought
accommodation with the Tamils despite being threatened by their rank and file,
the Tamils on the other hand had hopes that liberal elements among the Sinhalese
political elite would prevent the situation from getting out of control.\textsuperscript{23} When this
hope was dashed, the Tamil leadership began to despair. The Tamil underground
movements comprising militant youth elements began to make their presence felt
after the Janta Vimukti Perasuna movement was put down and government kept
the Tamil areas under control. A quarter century of agitation for a peaceful
resolution or a negotiated settlement between two ethnic communities had come
to a violent end.\textsuperscript{24}

In 1977, Jayewardene held out a token peace effort with a few reforms for
the Tamils. These include a provision in the new constitution which came into
effect in September 1978, where by:

(i) Tamil joined Sinhala as a national language although Sinhala continued to
    be the sole official language.
(ii) The setting up of District Development Councils (DDC) where the
    president would lead to the devolution of power and
(iii) A new admission policy for universities, which has led to a rise in Tamil
    admissions, in contrast with the discrimination policy followed by Mrs.
    Bandaranaike’s government.\textsuperscript{25}

However, these policy measures achieved nothing since they did not evoke
any satisfaction among the Tamils because they were perceived as too little and
too late. In any case, none of the changes were adequately implemented and thus
the token effort did not go far in assuaging the sense of grievance of the Sri
Lankan Tamil youth, some of whom decided to opt for the path of violence in the mid seventies.

The Politics of Standardization in Education

The Sinhalese dominated governments were, from the very onset, under a lot of pressure to provide employment to their youth. The Tamils were systematically attacked in the one field which had always been of special importance to them, that of education. The educational policy of Sri Lanka, itself dictated by communal policies, has led to disastrous consequences for the country as a whole and especially for the relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The switch from English to Sinhalese and Tamil as the medium of instruction from kindergarten to the university would perhaps have been necessary for national development and national pride. In practice, however, while the switchover was undertaken far too swiftly for the country’s libraries and universities to cope successfully with the lack of books in the official language, especially in subject which were of technical nature; it also reinforced the feelings of separateness in Sinhalese and Tamil children who were now compelled to have their education in separate streams and classrooms.

In the early 1970’s, the educational policy of the government entered a new phase of communal politics which discriminated against the Tamils. The government instituted what is called “standardisation” procedures with regard to scores for university admissions under which persons taking the examination in the Tamil language were required to achieve a higher score than those taking the examination in Sinhala in order to gain admission to the university.26

Bala Singham reports that the ratio of aggregate ‘A’ level marks demanded for admission for the Tamil and Sinhalese students were as follows.27
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tamil Students</th>
<th>Sinhalese Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Science</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Science</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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As a result this stipulation the proportion of Tamil students in many of the fields of study at the university level dropped dramatically.²⁸

This “standardisation” was a disaster alienating young Ceylonese Tamil men and women in particular from the society and the nation.²⁹ The “standardisation” procedure in university admissions was later withdrawn by the Jayewardene government in 1978 upon vigorous protests by the Tamils but the concession was limited. In January 1979 a not too disguised from of standardisation was re-introduced. It provides for university entrance on the following ratio. 30 Percent all Island, 50 percent on a district basis (24 districts) taking into account district populations, and 15 percent to twelve under developed districts. But this has not met with Tamil approval because, they argue, it is not based on admission by quality and is therefore discriminatory towards many qualified Tamils who would be refused university on geographical grounds alone.³⁰ With their deep regard for learning and the benefits they had obtained from higher education in the past, Tamil youth felt its very lifeblood being threatened with these policies. The difficulty of access to higher education was the force which finally succeeded in mobilising Tamil youth to a commitment to the state of Eelam and of complete separation from the Sinhalese territories. Young, intelligent and articulate Tamil youths saw armed agitation and separation as the only recourse left to them, to defend the Eelam and their subject people. These young men formed, from the early seventies, the nucleus of the Tamil Militant liberation movement in Eelam and operated in guerilla units against the Sinhalese army of occupation that had invaded their ancestral lands.
Another issue which has become a subject of acute conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils is the state aided aggressive colonization which began soon after independence, and has now swallowed nearly three thousand square miles of Tamil Eelam. This planned occupation of Tamil lands by hundreds of thousands of Sinhala people, aided and abetted by the Sinhala colonial regime in the areas where the huge mass of land less Tamil peasantry is stirring for a tiny plot to toil, was aimed to annihilate the geographical entity of the Tamil Nation and to reduce the Tamils to a minority in their own historical lands. The worst affected areas are in the eastern provinces. The gigantic Gal Oya and Madura Oya development schemes have robbed huge chunks of land from the Tamil speaking people of Islamic faith of the Batticoloa district. The colonisation schemes of Allai and Kantalia and the Yan Oya projects have engulfed the Trin Colmalai area which appears to be swamped by Sinhala colonisation. The Mahaweli development scheme has been planned to penetrate the north with massive Sinhala colonisation. This consistent policy of forceful annexation of Tamil traditional lands exposes the vicious nature of the racist policies of the Sinhala ruling classes.\footnote{31}

The Tamil national identity was also being attacked on another front at the time, the economic one. Since independence, many new industries largely financed by western governments had been created, but they had been exclusively sited in Sinhalese areas. Of all the irrigation projects, dam construction and industrial development funded by grants from British, American, Canadian and European Governments, not one had been sited in Tamil areas, which were left virtually untouched by the new developments. Between 1970 and 1975 all the millions spent on state Industries were in Sinhalese areas.\footnote{32} Thus, while the Sinhala nation flourished with massive development projects, the Tamil nation was alienated as an unwanted colony and banished into the wilderness of economic deprivation. Therefore the Tamils not only had to face the wrath of the Sinhalese mobs, but also had to contend with the increasing state terrorism,
perpetrated by the government. The government’s policy of restrictive admission to the university, discrimination in recruitment to government jobs and Sinhala colonization of Tamil areas had created an army of unemployed and frustrated Tamil young men. “Plunged in the despair of unemployed existence, frustrated with the possibility of higher education, angered by the imposition of an alien language, the Tamil youth realized that the redemption to their plight lay in revolutionary politics.”

The Tamil demand for separatism, for a higher regional autonomy, was a result of “confrontations”. Politics in Sri Lanka, the ethnic Tamil minorities concentration in the north of the country and its geographical proximity to the Indian mainland made the internal tension more acute. In this context ethnic cohesion and a common identity in the Tamil community helped to generate a separatist movement. The perceived threat to the Tamil ethnic identity from political, economic, social, cultural matters and a sense of deprivation aroused a sense of “insecurity” which culminated in the demand for a separate state.

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE TAMIL EELAM MOVEMENT**

The continuous discrimination against and deprivation of Tamils in all spheres of life in Sri Lankan society, systematically practiced by the Sinhalese dominated government, compelled the Tamil United Front (TUF) to demand a federal state from the Sri Lankan government. Tie six point demands of the TUF included:

(i) There should be a well defined place for the Tamil language
(ii) Sri Lanka should be a secular state
(iii) The fundamental rights of the ethnic minorities should be embodied in the constitution and made enforceable by law
(iv) Citizenship should be available to all who apply for it
(v) Abolition of the caste system
Obviously, the initial objective of the TUF was simply to secure a reasonable level of autonomy for the Tamil areas. However, in the course of time, its youth members demanded an independent Tamil state, popularized as Eelam. Subsequently, the Tamil youths who suffered most on account of continuous discrimination in the fields of higher education and employment, became frustrated and desperate. They questioned the effectiveness of the conventional tactics of the Gandhian doctrine of Ahimsa (non-violence) that had been employed by the older generation of TUF leaders to try to secure legitimate rights for the Tamils. The younger generation was convinced that their collective salvation lay only in the creation of a sovereign territorial nation state – Tamil Eelam – with the use of revolutionary methods. Consequently, Tamil youth boycotted schools and colleges, burned buses and National flags, and organised protest marches and the hoisting of black flags. The beginning of the separatist movement can be traced back to March 1973, when numerous Tamil youths were arrested for staging black flag demonstrations during the official visit of Mrs. Bandaranaike’s cabinet ministers to Jaffna. In the subsequent months, the government’s policy of arrests and detention of Tamils using emergency powers further provoked the Tamil youths to retaliate to and confront the government. In the process, the youth became a powerful political force that compelled the TUF to reconsider “its long cherished objective of establishing a Federal system of government.”

In this context, in 1975, Velupillai Prabhakaran who was a member of this group formed the New Tamil Tigers (NTT), under the chairmanship of Chetti Thanabalasingham. Later, V. Prabhakaran took over the leadership and the NTT was renamed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This group was the first separatist group in Sri Lanka to have indulged in fierce organised violence. V. Prabhakaran had immense organisational capacity and with the support of his contemporaries, he organised a politico-military structure for the Tamil New Tigers. He showed an extraordinary ability and talent for planning military
strategies and tactics and also maintaining discipline and good conduct within the lower ranks.\textsuperscript{36}

As the youths exerted pressure for a revolutionary solution in the form of a demand for an independent state, the leaders of Tamil United Front (TUF) responded by recasting the TUF as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), committed to establishing a separate Tamil state (Eelam) in the Tamil majority areas of Northeast provinces of Sri Lanka. In fact, such a move had become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. At the same time, the party representing the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Ceylon Workers Congress, did not lend its support to the separatist movement. However, it was willing to support the TULF as long as its main objective was to establish a linguistic state within the framework of a federal system of government. Under the TULF, the youth movements gradually organised a series of violent acts against the Police, Military and others whom they considered to the traitors to the Tamil cause and suffering.

On the eve of the 1977 Parliamentary elections, the United National Party accepted that the Tamil armed struggle for self determination was a result of numerous problems connected with policies of national oppression. This was evident when the UNP election manifesto of 1977 said:

“The UNP 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 a movement for the creation of a separate state.”

The manifesto further went on to say:

“In the interest of national integration and unity, so very necessary for the economic development of the whole country, the party feels such problems should be solved without the loss of time and party, when it comes to power, will take all
possible steps to remedy their grievances in such fields as education, colonisation, use of Tamil language and employment in the public and semi public corporations.  

Accordingly, the TULF contested the general parliamentary elections of 1977, seeking a mandate from the Tamil people of the Northern and the Eastern provinces, to set up “an independent sovereign state of Tamil Eelam”. In these elections, the TULF swept the polls comprehensively winning every constituency with Tamil majority in Northeast Sri Lanka. This unequivocal victory was a clear signal to the existing Sri Lankan government that the majority of Tamils were in sympathy with the demand for the creation of a separate state. When the UNP led by Mr. J.R. Jayewardene came into power, many Tamils hoped that he would take measures as promised in his election manifesto, and that the need to establish a separate Tamil state would not arise. However, all their hopes were shattered, one month after the elections, when Sinhalese policemen in the Jaffna Peninsula started an anti Tamil riot which subsequently spread to other parts of the country. This event of anti Tamil riots and rampage by the police led the militants to step up their armed activities, especially when thousands of refugees from the Sinhalese majority areas began to flood into the North eastern areas of the Island.

Under these circumstances, the UNP government became increasingly concerned with the fact that the 1977 anti-Tamil riots largely alienated the Tamils and created a very urgent need to appease them. In order to make some kind of an effort at reconciliation, the government made certain provisions in the promulgation of a new Constitution. With the adoption of the new constitution in September 1978, the government recognised Tamil as an official language. Despite such concessions, the government policy, of pursuing harsh measures against Tamil youths, further worsened the growing militancy among young
Tamils. Consequently, there was a further increase in the politically motivated acts of violence in the Northern provinces of the Island.

Subsequently, government promulgated the Prevention of Terrorism Act No. 48 on the plea that separatism challenged the integrity of the state and terrorism posed a danger to public security. This Act gave unlimited powers to the security forces in their operations against the Tamil militants. In addition, the government also imposed an emergency in the North of the Island and appointed a military commander to co-ordinate security arrangements in Jaffna with clear instructions to stamp out terrorism there. Under these circumstances, the Sinhalese Army ruthlessly carried out certain politically motivated crimes against the Tamils such as arbitrary arrests and the torture of Tamils in direct violation of the rights guaranteed in the Sri Lankan constitution.

The development and proliferation of the government security forces in various parts of the Northeast provinces of Sri Lanka was seen by the militants as an unwanted occupation of the Tamil areas without any support from the local Tamils. The lack of co-operation experienced by the security forces in the North and East led the government to rely on a garrison strategy. In response, the separatists attacked Police stations, Army units, government establishments and government informers. After each attack, they were able to blend into the civilian crowd and escape. In this environment, the soldiers became increasingly frustrated on account of their inability to combat terrorism and apprehend the militant Tamils. An outlet for this frustration became available with the promulgation of the Emergency Regulations and Prevention of Terrorism Act, which gave the security forces a free hand to arrest civilians and to commit acts of violence against the civilians.39

The July 1983 ethnic riots were the final toll, ringing in the end of any hope for peace in Sri Lanka. The riots shook the entire fabric of Sri Lankan society and gave rise to a permanent antagonism between the Sinhalese and the
Tamils. In later years, the monopoly of the political power wielded by the Sinhalese-Buddhist dominated elite and the hegemonic framework that they created to deny the Tamils their due share of control in the management of national life, slowly destroyed Sri Lanka as a united entity.

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that in the post independence period, the process of socio-economic development brought Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic differences into open conflict as both groups sought to consolidate their respective ethnic identities. As a result, the process of the growth of ethnic consciousness and identity accentuated the communal divide in Sri Lankan society. In the historical perspective, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has assumed serious dimensions with Sinhalese chauvinism reaching its peak. In turn, the Tamils have assiduously carried on their struggle for self-determination in order to retain their ethnic identity and fundamental rights. In the words of TDSA Dissanayake, “the youth in Jaffna district (the cradle of the insurrection), were raised in an environment of continuous conflict with the government.” In this context, the Tigers themselves have observed. “The struggle for self determination of the Eelam Tamils has an evolutionary history extending to over 40 years..... the armed struggle is a historical product of intolerable national oppression. It is an extension, continuation and advancement of the political struggle of oppressed people.”

Clearly the mutual antagonism and suspicion between the Sinhalese and the Tamils was the result and the culmination of a process of identity formation which has been developing for last the 40 years. This has resulted in a cycle of violence which has undermined the security and stability of the state. This protracted ethnic conflict has virtually assumed the dimensions of a civil war and poses a great threat to the independence and territorial integrity of the state of Sri Lanka.
India’s concerns and subsequent involvement in the conflict

Long drawn ethnic political turbulence in Sri Lanka is a reminder of the complicated question of self-determination of minorities in a multinational and multiethnic state.\textsuperscript{41} Having such a conflict practically at its doorstep was bound to draw India into the mix sooner or later. As early as 1987, India began to take an active interest in the resolution of the crisis, due to the seeming inability of the Sri Lankan government to deal with its internal problems. India’s involvement in the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis must be seen within the context of her national interest, domestic compulsions, threats posed to her security in terms of the influx of Sri Lankan refugees and the involvement of extra regional powers in this conflict. India’s involvement in Sri Lanka’s ethnic problems was mainly influenced by the following two important factors:

(i) Geo-Strategic Factors

Although Sri Lanka is physically isolated from the Indian sub-continent, but its geo-strategic location in the mid of the Indian Ocean has a great significance to all its neighbours. As a regional power in South Asia, India has its own regional security concerns which are tied up, at least partially, with that of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, any great threat to the security and stability of Sri Lanka is bound to be viewed by India as a direct threat to her own security. This perception has been repeatedly articulated by persons like Nehru, Menon, and Panikkar, who were responsible for the assessment of India’s security concerns at various times in the post-independence period. Subsequent generations of Indian think tanks of strategic analysts have reiterated this view and have stated that any change in the states of Sri Lanka will have great implications on Indian security dimensions.\textsuperscript{42} Thus India must always remain alert under all circumstances towards any unfavourable interference by outside powers in this region.
The Tamil Nadu Factor

Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils have a very close affinity and brotherly relations because of their close cultural homogeneity. During the communal riots in Sri Lanka, some relatives of Indian Tamils were killed. As a result, the Tamils in India became distraught in the wake of these unprecedented ethnic developments in the island nation. The Tamil Nadu factor has greatly influenced the union government of India in guiding the course of Indo-Sri Lanka relations which ultimately culminated in the introduction of the IPKF into Sri Lanka.43

So, the geographical proximity of India and Sri Lanka and the Tamil connection between the two nations has kept India involved in Sri Lankan ethnic affairs. This involvement grew with time ending in intervention. The peculiar circumstances of India becoming too important a factor to be ignored by Sri Lanka in her pursuit for a resolution to the Tamil problem, the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement was signed to establish peace and normalcy in Sri Lanka with the subsequent sending of India troops there.44

Matters which deserve careful investigation in this context are:

(i) The legitimacy of the Tamils claim for a separate state (Eelam)
(ii) The means they are applying to achieve their goal
(iii) The Indian attitude to the problem
(iv) Security implications for the regions

Tamils, the minority group in Sri Lanka comprising around 18% of the total population, but forming an overwhelming majority 92% in the northern province of Jaffna and a substantial minority 40% in the eastern province of Batticaloa, have been engaged in armed struggle for the creation of a separate Tamil state (Eelam) in the Northern and eastern provinces.45

Initially, the Tamils attempted to fight politically and function within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. Failing to achieve politically what they
considered their legitimate objectives, and being victims of frequent ethnic discrimination, the Tamils later resorted to a force of arms to find an extreme solution of their objective... the creation of a separate Tamil state. With this end in view, various militant groups were organised among which the Liberation Tigers of Tamils Eelam (LTTE) emerged as the most dominant.46

The Tamil issue in Sri Lanka derives its Indian dimension by virtue of the fact that:

(a) There is a large Tamil population in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, separated from the Tamil populated northern region of Sri Lanka only by the 22 mile wide Palk Straits.

(b) The Tamils in Sri Lanka have always looked beyond the Palk Straits for the land of their origin and for reassurance.

(c) Militant Tamils sought and got shelter and arms from India.

(d) Following the troubles in Sri Lanka there was a huge influx of refugees, about 20000, into the southern parts of India.47

The huge influx of Tamil refugees into the territory of India in the mid-eighties provided the primary grounds for expressing legitimate concerns about the ethnic problems in Sri Lanka. Gradually these concerns deepened and India began giving militant Tamils arms as well as training.48 Subsequently, Indian diplomacy succeeded in super-imposing New Delhi as an active mediator in the negotiations between the Tamils and Sri Lankan government. India manipulated the situation to secure her position in relation to the Sri Lankan government as well as the Tamil guerrillas from where she could influence events in Sri Lanka.

The Indian position and posture developed so actively that it reached a point where she allowed herself to cross the Sri Lankan government when goods and medicines were dropped to the blockaded people in Jaffna.49
India’s efforts at helping to find a solution to the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka culminated in the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement to establish peace and normalcy in Sri Lanka. It was essentially a 14 points memorandum of understanding between the government of India and that of Sri Lanka with Colombo (Sri Lankan government) speaking on behalf of the Sinhalese and New Delhi (Indian government) on behalf of the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

The unfortunate fallout of the 1987 accord and the intervention of the IPKF was the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, one of the signatories to the accord. The ban on the LTTE by the Indian Government produced varied reactions and also led to pressure on the government domestically from the opposition as well as from the outside to take a harder political line towards the LTTE. The Indo-Sri Lankan Peace Accord made it clear to Sri Lanka that India did not want the LTTE to establish a separate state in the North and the East. The LTTE reaction to the ban was that ‘New Delhi’ was trying to crush the struggle of Sri Lankan Tamils for Independence.50

**Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India**

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has directly affected India, due to the massive influx of refugees from Sri Lanka to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Moreover, Indian political stability was shaken, particularly in Tamil Nadu, when the people paralysed the Tamil Nadu government by state-wide bandhs, strikes, self immolation and the destruction of public properties. They are concurrently exerting unprecedented pressure on the government of India to intervene militarily to save their brother Tamils in Sri Lanka.

India has always enjoyed a relationship with Sri Lanka. The socio-economic and cultural contacts between Indian and Sri Lanka have been cordial. Tamil Nadu, the southern state of India, has several similarities and commonality with the Tamils of Sri Lanka particularly in matters of language, literature,
religion, culture, and philosophy. Thus most of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees took shelter in the state of Tamil Nadu where they felt most at home.

Sri Lankan Refugees came to Tamil Nadu mainly in three phases. The first phase covering the period 1983-87 was more dynamic in the sense that it registered a large scale exodus of refugees of whom about a half came to India. The second phase 1989-91, coinciding with the Eelam War II, recorded relatively less refugee outflow. The third phase of exodus started in August 1996 as a result of the continuing Eelam War III.

The Tamil Nadu government drew up a contingency plan towards the end of April 1996 to face a possible large scale refugee influx from Sri Lanka where the war had reached a critical phase. This planning remained quite in tune with its declared policy since 1990 that “although we may not wish for refugees, there is no alternative to receiving them and providing for them.”

Refugees, by definition, are people who have fled from their homeland because of war, ethnic conflict, persecution or personal danger. They became stateless and, in many cases, become pawns in political entanglements, on a scale much larger than those which they have left behind.

A few preliminary observations must be made before attempting to analyse the status of the Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu today. A small country, with only a population of 17 million, Sri Lanka is a principal source of the world’s refugees and displaced persons. Nearly half of the Tamil population of two million in the North and the East have become displaced. In addition, thousands of Muslims and Sinhalese have become homeless and are in “relief camps” in Sri Lanka itself. According to the Sri Lankan government, rations are being provided to 573,372 persons residing both within and outside the relief centres. The US Committee for Refugees, in an issue paper published three years ago, rightly characterised Sri Lanka as an “Island of Refugees.” The overwhelming majority of those who have fled from Sri Lanka have not gone to the developed world; in
fact, the number who came to India is many times more than those who took asylum in the West.

The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu could be categorised into three categories: (1) Those in the Refugee Camps; According to the Policy Note for 1994-95, issued by the Tamil Nadu Government, 68,543 refugees were accommodated in 122 refugee camps located in different parts of the state; (2) Refugees, who have been identified as belonging to militant groups; 1,629 militant refugees are stationed in five special Camps at Vallore, Pudukottai, Salem, Chengalpettu MGR and Chennai; (3) Refugees, who maintain themselves, outside the camps.

Following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the Tamil Nadu Government asked these refugees to register themselves with the nearest police station. By July 1991, 26,363 refugees had registered themselves with the police. Soon afterwards, the police wanted to apprehended those who had not registered, which resulted in the arrest of 1,800 refugees under the Foreigners’ Act.51

The refugee phenomenon is an offshoot of Sri Lanka Government’s savage attacks on Sri Lankan Tamil population. The Sri Lankan Tamils are highly politicised and the refugees became a reservoir for recruitment into Tamil militant groups. The competitive nature of Tamil Nadu politics, with the two Dravidian parties vying with one another in championing the Sri Lankan Tamil cause and New Delhi’s policy of arming the Tamil militant naturally resulted in the Government turning a ‘Nelson’s eye’ to the atrocities committed by the Tamil militants. Whether it was the bomb blast in the Meenambakkam airport, the conversion of Tamil Nadu coast into sanctuary – supply base for the war machine or intra-militant violent clashes – the Tamil militants had their way and became a law unto themselves.

The dastardly assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, allegedly by a suicide squad of the LTTE, swung the pendulum to the other extreme. Tamil
Nadu is yet to recover from the catastrophe and Sri Lankan Tamils overnight became unwelcome in Tamil Nadu. What is more, the Government of Tamil Nadu stepped up its pressure tactics to get the refugees repatriated to the Island Republic at the earliest.

When attempting an analysis of the living conditions of Sri Lanka Tamil refugees in India, it is necessary to highlight the fact that they have come from a poor country to a poorer one. The cash doles; the provision of rice, sugar and kerosene at subsidised rates; and the free electricity – none of these things is available to the local population of poor Indian Tamils in whose midst the camps are situated. This reality is mentioned not to deny refugees their due – in fact the living conditions in the camps could be much improved if the lower rungs of the bureaucracy become more sensitive to refugee feelings – but to set the record straight in the context of the misguided criticism often levelled by human rights organisations. The US Committee for Refugees, in its 1991 Report, has noted that “India has accorded a welcome to Tamil asylum seekers that is as generous as any refugee groups in Asia.” Approximately Rs 15 Crore are spent annually on the maintenance of the refugees. The expenditure is initially incurred by the Tamil Nadu Government, to be subsequently reimbursed by the Government of India.52

When the repatriation of refugees commended on 22 January 1992, there was an outburst of criticism that India was “pressurising” the refugees to leave; the repatriation was “involuntary” and that since peace had not returned to Sri Lanka the refugees would not be “safe” on the Island. The NGOs working amongst the refugees in India and human rights organisations like Asia Watch alleged that the helpless refugees were being “forced” to leave and their signatures had been falsely obtained on option forms (unfortunately the forms were printed in English), the contents of which they did not know. In July 1992, the Government of India announced that it would permit UNHCR presence in India
and UNHCR could ensure that “those refugees who do not wish to return are not sent back.”

The decision to permit the UNHCR to operate in India and to monitor the repatriation has facilitated the safe return of Tamil refugees to Sri Lanka. Though the UNHCR officials are not permitted to visit the refugee camps, any refugee can contact the UNHCR if he/she wishes to do so. According to UNHCR sources, they have conducted interviews with roughly 70 percent of the refugees to verify the “voluntary nature” of their return and they are convinced that the refugees have not been subjected to any “overt coercion”. Only 19 families, comprising some 68 persons, complained that they have been repatriated “under duress” and they were permitted to return to refugee camps following UNHCR intervention. The UNHCR presence in Tamil Nadu has also facilitated “better co-ordination”. The UNHCR has been operating in Sri Lanka since 1987 and the co-ordination between the two units, coupled with the co-operation of the bureaucracy on both sides, has contributed to the smooth functioning and overall success of the repatriation process. According to the US Committee for Refugees, “There is little question that the presence of the UNHCR facilities has been re-assuring to displaced person and provided them with a meaningfully safe alternative to the camps in Tamil Nadu.”

The refugees, understandably, were uncertain about their future in Sri Lanka. Fortunately their fears were unfounded. According to a Report published by the UNHCR “the overall picture with regard to the security and protection of returnees was very encouraging.” And those who have returned to Sri Lanka are sending letters to their friends in India about the welcome they have received, which has set in motion a favourable climate for the return of the refugees. In this connection, it must be highlighted that there was hardly any criticism against the Indian Government during the latest phase of repatriation which took place in March 1995.
The UNHCR presence in Madras and the apparent maintenance of transparency through the whole operation have earned India considerable international goodwill. What is more, the recent experience has clearly shown that though peace and normalcy have not returned to the north and east of Sri Lanka, the refugees are slowly realizing a role in the peace making process and the rehabilitation of the war ravaged economy. Under these circumstances, New Delhi and Chennai should seriously consider speeding up the process of voluntary repatriation. At present, only two ships, M.V. Nicobar and M.V. Ramanujan, ply between Rameshwaram and Talaimannar and between Chennai and Trincomalee. These ships normally take passengers and goods to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and are occasionally diverted for repatriating refugees. According to informed sources, the UNHCR has offered to charter ships exclusively for repatriation, but no decision has so far been taken in this matter by New Delhi. It would be worthwhile to accept the UNHCR offer or New Delhi might consider chartering additional ships so that the refugees are able to return quickly and safely to Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

Ethnicity has been the root cause of internal strife and civil wars the world over. The case with the trouble in the island nation of Sri Lanka is no different. The major ethnic and cultural differences among the two major population groups in the nation have caused friction, which have only been worsened by the pro Sinhala policies of the government.

The largest segment of the population, the Sinhala people, consider themselves to be descendents of the original occupants of the island, who are supposed to have hailed from the northern states of India, and were themselves of Aryan descent. The second largest population group is the Sri Lankan Tamils who are descended from the settlers who arrived here from the more southern states of India, and are Dravidian n descent. Both ethnic groups consider the island nation
their rightful ancestral home, although the Sinhala section sees the Tamils as outsiders who have no right to be in the land that the Sinhala see as their own. The hugely divergent cultures, language, history, and sense of identity of the two groups have led to the ongoing strife that has created one of the largest movements of refugees in the world.

The issues have been further complicated by the policies adopted by the Sri Lankan Government, post independence, which were overtly, and clearly, anti-Tamil and Pro-Sinhala in nature. From the adoption of Sinhala as the only official language, to the adoption of educational policies that put Tamil students at a disadvantage, the policies went a long way to deepening the ethnic divide between the two communities. Social and industrial policies added to the problem, especially when all the investment of foreign nations and multinationals was channelled into the Sinhala territories, leaving the Tamil areas in penury and underdevelopment.

After decades of such policies and internal ethnic identity forging, it was not surprising that the whole thing erupted in violent ethnic riots leading to serious loss of life and eventually to the movement of large parts of the Tamil Population out of the country into India and other nations. Although India initially held out a warm welcome for the refugees, especially with a view to the shared cultural, language, and religious heritage they had with the local Tamils, it was forced to change its views, and policies, when the presence of the refugees not only created socio-political and security issues, but actually went on to result in the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Ever since then, the state has followed an active policy of repatriating those of the refugees who have no objection to returning to their hometowns now that things are better. India’s involvement in the issue, motivated by cultural, territorial, and national interests, has resulted in some semblance of agreement and accord, off and on, and much more is to be hoped for in the future.
REFERENCES

1. The name ‘Moor’ was given to Sri Lanka’s Muslim Community in the days of Portuguese Colonial Rule.

2. The term ‘Burgher’ strictly speaking refers to the descendants of the European officials who worked in Sri Lanka for the Dutch East India company from 656-1796. In the Parlance of Sri Lanka, persons of Portuguese descent as well as Eurasians in general are placed in this category.


9. Eelam means State. In order to ensure their survival and progress. The Tamil in 1976 decide to demand a separate state.


47. The Tamils Fight for National Freedom, A Memorandum submitted by the LTTE to the 7th summit meeting of Non-Aligned Nations help in New Delhi, March 7-15, 1983.


