CHAPTER II

EVOLUTION OF ETHNIC DIVIDE IN SRI LANKA

Geographical Configuration

Sri Lanka presents a rich diversity of peoples and cultures, some ancient and indigenous, others modern and transplanted. From the early centuries of its long history, Sri Lanka has been a diverse society, the components of diversity being ethnicity, language and religion. In the vast waters of the Indian ocean, Sri Lanka is a small island which occupies a focal position. Situated in the north of equator between latitudes 5°55' - 9°51' North and Longitude 79°41' - 81°53' East, the island is separated from the Indian sub-continent by a narrow strip of water, the Palk Straits. The small island of Sri Lanka spanning over an area of 65,525 square kilometers has a maximum length of 432 kilometers and a maximum width of 224 kilometers, divided into nine provinces with twenty-four districts.¹

Geographically, the island conforming a southern continuation of the Deccan Plateau of India, comprises a varied landscape of low and high lands, coastal plains and a plateau of vast tracts. Broadly, from the angle of relief, the island may be divided into up country - a region consisting of high central massif and occupying about one-fifth of the country's area; and a low country - an area covering the whole of the northern part of the island, and the coastal belt of varying width. Between these two sets of topographical features lies the intermediate zone which is surrounded by an outer or lower zone of lowlands.

As the climate of Sri Lanka is mainly controlled by its location within the tropics, three distinct agro-climatic zones can be identified. The first, the Wet zone which covers the South-western part of the island and receives the highest monsoon rains, is densely populated. This region is highly developed as it is the economic nerve of the country with main commercial estate, plantations of tea, rubber, coconut and spices. The second is, the dry zone which covers the entire northern and eastern parts of the island and is dependent for more than half of each year on surface water. In the dry zones, Jaffna peninsula is a "unique region with a strong personality in which traits due to its physique, its people and its position may be discerned." The climate being extreme and harsh in nature, the Jaffna peninsula is sparsely populated with few concentrations. A third distinct climatic zone is found in the mountainous central massif, where above 2,000 feet, the climate is fresh and salubrious and the jungles have been cleared for the cultivation of tea crop. Broadly, the island has been endowed with a warm, tropical climate and a varied of topography, which presents a remarkable contrast among its own people.

Demographic setting: Racial, Religious, and Linguistic

Sri Lanka has a total population of 14,850,000, split into separate ethnic, linguistic and religious communities as shown in Table 1 in the last page of this chapter. The Sinhalese account for 74.0 per cent of the total population. Following it, the Sri Lankan Tamils stand at about 13 per cent and Moors (Indians and Sri Lankans) make up 7 per cent of the total population. The Indian Tamils, whose total


strength declined over the years as a result of their repatriation to India, under the agreements of 1964 and 1974, share approximately 5.6 per cent of the population. The less important distinct racial groups such as (1) Malays; (2) Burghers; (3) Eurasians; (4) Europeans and (5) Veddahs collectively cover 0.5 per cent of the nation’s total strength.

Another element which promoted the pluralistic character of Sri Lankan society is the religion based division of Communities. The table 2, shows that the Buddhism is the majority religion in Sri Lanka, followed by the Hinduism, the Christianity and the Islam. Further, it reveals that about 92 per cent of the Sinhalese are Buddhists and they constitute about two-thirds of the total population of Sri Lanka. Similarly, approximately 90 per cent of the Tamils are Hindus and they make up slightly more than one-sixth of the island’s population. While Christians and Muslims are almost equal in number, 90 per cent of the Christians are Roman Catholics drawn from the Sinhalese, Tamil and Burgher Communities.

The Linguistic distribution of population shows that Sinhala is the language of 58.9 per cent of the population. 21.6 per cent of the population speak the Tamil language while only 2 per cent speak English. People who can speak the Sinhala and the English constitute 4.2 per cent. Both English and Tamil can be spoken by 2 per cent. 9.9 per cent can converse in both Tamil and Sinhala. About 3.2 per cent can speak Sinhala, Tamil and English Languages. The non-Sinhalese and the non-Tamils mainly constitute the trilingual population.4

The Moors, nevertheless of Tamil is being the language of their hearth and home, who settled in the Sinhalese areas also speak Sinhala. Indeed in all these communities, a small segment mainly because of their education through English medium speak English as well as their mother-tongue. But the number of those among Sinhalese being fluent in Tamil and amongst Tamils in Sinhala is rather very small.

**Early History of Sri Lanka**

Lanka was the name of the country in the Indian epic *Ramayana* from 200 - 100 B.C. The old Sinhalese people called their country *Lanka Dipa* - resplendent island. the same as "Sri Lanka" - glorious island. The name 'Ceylon' is an European version of Sinhala - Sinhalese, which originates from the old Indian word *Singha* which means Lion. The outstanding fact of Sri Lanka’s nationality is that, from ancient times and continuously over the last two millennia, two major ethnic people - the Sinhalese and the Tamils - have lived in and shared the country as co-settlers. This shared descent is traceable to the 2nd century B.C. The history of the earlier settlers has not been unravelled on a valid historical basis and is wrapped up in myths and legends discovered by the Pali chronicles of the Sinhalese - the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa, written in Pali language about 4th and 6th centuries AD respectively. Both these chronicles are verse compositions in Pali, the Buddhist scriptural language, written by Buddhist monks, not in the historical tradition, but as being the words of Mahanama, the author of Mahavamsa "for the serene joy and emotion of the pious". They were written unabashedly from the Sinhalese-Buddhist stand point.⁵

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The history of the first man in Sri Lanka is still disputed. The Balangoda stone age cultures have recently been dated by thermoluminescence to $5,000 \pm 700$ years BC. The Balangoda man was basically Australoid with some Neanderthaloid characteristics. The Vaddas or Veddhas, aboriginals still living in Sri Lanka, are most likely descendants of the Balangoda man mixed with Sinhalese and Tamils. Some sources state that the Vaddas originally lived in South India. It is presumed that they were driven out by the Dravidians while there was still land-connections with Sri Lanka (the present Adams Bridge).

According to 'Mahavamsa' (one of Sri Lanka's national epics), Prince Vijaya came with 700 men from North India, and landed on the North-West Coast of Sri Lanka. The Legend relates Vijaya as being grandson of a lion, therefore, his people were called Sinhalese. The 'Mahavamsa' lets the arrival of Vijaya coincide with the passing away of the Buddha. Vijaya and his people are blessed by the Buddha and given the command to introduce his faith in the country. Though a myth, it was of great symbolic importance for the future development of Buddhism and its close links with the governing kings of the country. Buddhism has taught the Sinhalese to consider themselves as a chosen people to live in Sri Lanka and to adhere to Buddhism. One can thus trace the idea of unity between people (race), land, and religion, from ancient time in Sri Lanka, a perception which has proved fatal in recent times.\(^6\)


But it is an undeniable fact that, in the proto-historic period of the island (1000 - 100 BC) there were two Naga Kingdoms, one in the North called Naga Tivu in Tamil, and called Naga Dipa in the Indian Sanskrit Works, and the other in the South-West, in Kelaniya. Even the Pali chronicles mention them in a different context, in connection with the purported visits of Buddha to the Island. The Mahabharat and Ramayana, the two great Indian epics written in Sanskrit before 6th century B.C. mention the Naga Kingdoms and their conquest by Ravana, the Tamil Yaksha King of Lanka. So does the Greek astronomer and geographer Ptolemy, writing in the 2nd century, AD, who locates Naga Dipa in the north, covering the territory from Chilaw in the West to below Trincomalee in the East.8

Origin of Ethnic Groups: Invasions and Settlements by Aryans and Dravidians

From antiquity, Ceylon has served as an abode for immigrants from the adjacent sub-continent. Out of half a dozen ethnic communities living in Sri Lanka, none can claim to be the original inhabitants of the island. To trace out the roots of both the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, one could easily evidence that they are the descendants of India’s noble Aryan and Dravidian families respectively. The first Sinhalese were of Indo-Aryan origin from North India, and their cradle was probably in the Indus area. There is, however, evidence of invasions also from North-East India, Bengal and Orissa; and of early colonization of the North-East and the dry area in the South east. They settled in the dry zone of northern part of Sri Lanka - around 500 B.C.9 It is believed that the invasion and establishment of supremacy

8. Satchi Ponnambalam, op.cit. 17.

subsequently in the southern part of the island by the North Indian King named Vijaya with his band of 700 men marked the beginning of Sinhalese migration to Sri Lanka. As the "founder and custodian" of Sinhalese race, King Vijaya was said to be the first traditional king of Ceylon from east and west coast of India. colonised Ceylon. and the language that the Sinhalese brought was derived from Sanskrit.

Two principal centres of Sinhalese civilization evolved in the Central North, namely, around the cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva, each later to become Capital of the country. Besides the irrigation works, which can be considered the corner stones in the economic building of the Sinhalese cultures. J. de Silva claims that Buddhism, introduced in 300-250 BC was of equal importance for the development of the society. After settling themselves down permanently in Sri Lanka, slowly the Sinhalese assimilation with Veddhas started. Similarly they were also intermixed more substantially with the later Dravidian immigrants from Malabar and Coromandal Coasts of South India. Not withstanding it, the Sinhalese maintained a social identity which differed from others. It was not because of their language the Sinhalese kept their distinct identity, but they were virtually interested in converting all people to Buddhism about 3rd century B.C. by which to strengthen the belief that "Sri Lanka is the land of the Sinhalese (Sinhadipa) and of Buddhism

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11. Often the Sinhalese Kings including Vijaya and noble families in later times too continued to inter-marry with the people of South India. The ancestors of large numbers of people who now consider themselves to be Sinhalese, clearly migrated from South India, a fact which casts doubt upon the notion that this Sinhalese race is Aryan in origin. James Manor (ed.). see "Introduction" in Sri Lanka in Change and Crisis (London, 1984), p.8.
The exact time of first Tamil settlements in Sri Lanka is still not proved. De Silva says, most likely the Aryans arrived a few centuries before the Dravidian settlers. During the third Century B.C., Urban and trading centres were established in South India, and it is probable that trade between this area and Sri Lanka developed. Since there are historians who claimed the origins of Veddas from Dravidian stock, it is even possible to prove that, Veddas were tribal Tamils who might have reached the island earlier before all the racial origins of Sri Lanka. Also the close proximity of South India to Sri Lanka than North India must have helped the Dravidian migrators in their easy access to Sri Lanka. However, it is believed that the substantial Tamil settlements were established only centuries after the Sinhalese arrived in the Island. But contrary to it, there is a school which holds the view that there was a Tamil Kingdom in Jaffna centuries earlier to the time of the classical Sinhalese Kingdom. The Sinhalese throne was in 237 BC seized by the Tamils, and later Elara, general of Cola, one of the main Kingdoms in South India, invaded and ruled at Anuradhapura for 44 years (205-161 BC). His reign was renowned for its justice and fair administration. Elara was conquered and killed by Dutthagamini, legendary prince from the South, who went on a holy war against the Dravidians. However, at the time of this strive, ethnicity was not an important element. Neither the Sinhalese nor the Tamils, insisted on racial purity. In fact, tension was not

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normal. argues de Silva. Sri Lanka was from her early recorded history, a multi-racial society (a concept which, according to de Silva, stands for harmony between races and groups in contrast to a plural society, where tension is common). An intensive Tamil migration to Ceylon coincided with the inauguration of powerful South Indian Hindu Kingdom, in 5th century A.D. Their periodic invasions, mainly Cholas, on Sinhalese Kingdoms apparently resulted the influx of Dravidians mainly from Malabar Coromandal Coast and Travancore - Cochin (which now form the Kerala State) princely states of South India.

So the people who had migrated through the channels of successive Tamil invasions from South India and later on by voluntary migrations were called "Sri Lankan Tamils". These early immigrants indigenous Tamils who have identified the North-Eastern provinces as their traditional home-lands belonged to the country in the same way as the Sinhalese.

The prior arrival of the Aryans, the Sinhalese, in Sri Lanka as compared to the Dravidians, i.e. Tamils, along with the historical myths connected with the arrival of Vijaya, are, however, contested by several scholars. They propose that Sri Lanka had already for a long time been inhabited by people with settled agriculture at the time of the migrations. An amalgamation of the old inhabitants with the new settlers took place, forming the foundations of the Sri Lanka society. No priority of the arrival or 'ownership' to the land can, therefore, be bestowed to any particular group of migrants.¹⁵ Bandaranayake, referring to recent archeological research, states that internal factors were as important for the development of the Sri Lanka civilization as

the influx of and settlement of migrants from India. He proposes that the migration of culture, i.e., ideas and techniques, was possible even in pre-historic and early historic time, not necessitating the migration of people. In accordance with several historians and researchers, Gunawardena also claims that the wars fought over the centuries were struggles for power between feudal rulers or kings located in Sri Lanka, or between them and Kings in South India, often with dynastic connections. The struggles did not arise out of ethnic or religious conflicts. The introduction and spread of Sinhala language and Buddhism was, according to Goonatilake, related to the rise of a strong kingdom. However, not until the irrigation system made possible a sufficient surplus, did a centralised state power emerge. Buddhism and its associations functioned as ideological 'gum' in the legitimization of the ruler and as a system of state control. This process most likely did not take place until at least four hundred years after Buddhism was initially proclaimed.

Unlike the Sri Lankan Tamils, the origin of Indian Tamils was relatively recent in the island. Although the history of the migration of labourers from India to Ceylon was almost as old as the beginning of Ceylon plantation, it was intensified only in the era of British supremacy over the island. As cheap labour was available in South Indian villages, the British Plantation owners imported independent Tamil

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18. For instance, the Dutch also brought the Indians to work on cinnamon plantations, but emigration was very irregular and not static. See Urmila Phadnis, "The 1964 Indo-Ceylonese Pact and the Stateless Persons in Ceylon," India Quarterly (New Delhi) Vol. XXIII, No. 4, Oct-Dec., 1967, p. 363.
coolies to work on their plantations, by paying advances as cash inducement for them to migrate to Ceylon.\(^1\) Thus the large scale influx of Indian Tamil labourers to Ceylon started from the thirties of the 19th century and continued till the forties of the 20th century. By 1931, the Indian Tamil immigrants outnumbered the descendants of the Ceylonese Tamils and together the two groups made up nearly 25 per cent of the country’s population.

Sri Lanka has a small, but significant Muslim population categorised into Ceylonese Moors, Indian Moors and Malays. The Ceylonese Moors claim to be the descendants of the Arab traders who married Sinhalese and Tamils later. The Indian Moors are the South Indian traders whose enterprise brought them to Ceylon. The Malay Muslims, who trace their ancestry to South East Asia, seem to have come as mercenaries with the Dutch.

The residual population consists mostly of Burghers, Dutch and Portuguese. The former is descendants of Europeans who settled in Ceylon and intermarried with the Sinhalese and Tamils and from their families developed a Burgher Community of Eurasians. The later is the extraction of Portuguese who had colonized Ceylon in 1505. Other small communities in the fascinating social composition of Ceylon are European, namely British Parsees from Bombay, a few Chinese and some Telugu speaking South Indian gypsies known as Kuravans.

**Divisions within the Ethnic Groups**

It must be noted that the major ethnic groups are not monolithic. Intra-ethnic group differences and rivalries exist. Absence of homogeneity within each ethnic

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group as a result of its internal division, determined by caste, religion, cultural variations, economic inequalities and ethnic origin etc., further amplified the complicated plural structure of Sri Lanka. Basically, the Sinhalese community is divisible into low country (the littoral areas) and Kandyan Sinhalese, a traditional distinction of regional settlement emerged in the period of European hegemony. The political rivalry between the two subgroups has surfaced occasionally.\textsuperscript{20} However, vis-a-vis the Tamils, the Sinhalese are more or less united. As a representative community of direct European influence, the low country Sinhalese have had economic and professional advantages over the Kandyans. In terms of religion, the majority of the Christians in the Sinhalese community belong to the low country Sinhalese though they are still overwhelmingly Buddhists.

The Kandyans are usually the less educated people who remained attached to the traditional social values and customs. Although language brought both the Sinhalese groups together, there has, for long, been a feeling of caution and reserve between them. The up country Sinhalese, like many rural or mountain dwellers elsewhere consider those from the low country to be more quick-witted, sophisticated and less trustworthy than simpler more conservative up country people.\textsuperscript{21} Their simple way of life closely bound up with the Buddhist religion which almost thwarted missionary influence on them.

The caste system is another important element responsible for the division among the Sinhalese. Though drawing social boundary on the vital caste consideration is absolutely opposed to the dogma of Buddhism, the contemporary

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20. Fred Halliday, "The Ceylonese Insurrection", in Robin Blackburn, (ed.), 

Sinhalese today find themselves divided on cast lines. It is the result of the impact of Brahmanical Hinduism on Buddhist social structure for 2000 years, wedded more to egalitarian concepts of birth and status. But the magnitude of Sinhalese caste gamut is comparatively flexible than the sanctified Hindu Tamil caste adoption. By way of summing up it may be said that while caste is important among the Sinhalese, it is vital to the Tamils.\(^{22}\)

Like the Sinhalese, the Tamils are also categorized as Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. As against the Tamils, the Sinhalese demarcation was not evident from their distinct channels of origin in the island. But their internal differentiation is accentuated in terms of caste, cultural and economic positions. On the contrary, the Tamils marked their stratification on the basis of complex variables such as history of their evolution in the island, socio-economic status, educational background and more significantly their diversity in topography of residence.

Most of the recent settlers of South Indian origin known as the Indian Tamils have a depressed socio-economic status and time and again been subject to step-motherly treatment in political recognition (citizenship question) in comparison with their counterparts in Northern and Eastern provinces. First, the socio-economic inequalities were strongly identified among the two Tamil groups which project the differences between Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. Unlike the Indian Tamils, a sizeable number of Ceylon Tamils, particularly those from Jaffna, have important positions in mercantile, bureaucratic and other professional sectors since the British colonial times and as well in the post independence era. Their early English education under missionary schooling system had promoted their position in the government administrative sectors and the reputation earned through it made them superior than

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the rest. But most of the Indian Tamils deprived of political, recognition and citizenship rights are extremely poor and illiterate and they are employed as lowly menials.

There is yet another cultural factor that serves to alienate the Indian Tamils from the indigenous Tamil population. The Sri Lankan Tamils deem themselves to be a class apart having their unique customs and heritage distinct from all other Tamil people of South India. Their cultural orthodoxy makes them assert their separate identity which spoils the Tamil social homogeneity, though they are all from a single racial stock called the Dravidians.

The Ceylon Tamils, particularly those of the Jaffna peninsula, the headquarters of so-called Tamil Cultural protectors, see themselves as custodian of the very existence of Tamil civilization. They rank Indian Tamils and others as of lower strata and even refuse to have matrimonial alliances with them.\textsuperscript{23} This kind of superiority complex mainly as a result of the extreme social and religious conservatism, coupled with their own caste status prompted them to separate culturally not only from the Tamil folk of Mainland of Tamil Nadu but also from all other groups of Tamils including the East Coast Sri Lankan Tamils.\textsuperscript{24}

Thus, the caste structure among the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lankan society vividly shows that the caste divisions mainly occur in the light of socio-cultural and economic context. Added to it is the lack of unanimity in the roots of each community’s origin which enhances their inherited divergence of communal


\textsuperscript{24} Arasaratnam, \textit{op.cit.}, p.102.
identification reflecting in the pluralist composition of the Sri Lankan society.

**Geographical Settlement of Ethnic Groups**

Geographical separation of each ethnic group also intensifies the ethnic cleavages in Sri Lanka. Though ethnic groups are diffused throughout the island, a numerical predominance of each group could be seen in particularly well defined areas. One group's overwhelming preponderance in a particular part of the island makes others very insignificant in number. Thus, the ethnic concentration divides the whole island mainly into two ethnic parts. The Sinhalese part which comprises more than two-thirds of the country's total area and the Tamil part which has only less than one-third of the island's space - as against the historical division of three kingdoms - Kandy, Jaffna and Kottee.

Except the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, all the remaining seven provinces have the highest concentration of the Sinhalese numerically. Apart from it, the only district among all the seventeen districts in the seven provinces which gives less representation to the Sinhalese is Nuwara Eliya in the Central province. Here the Indian Tamils are in majority as they comprise 47.3 per cent while the Sinhalese account for 35.9 per cent of total population. This is the only district where the Indian Tamils have their sizeable concentration though they are spread all over the country. Hence, outside the two Tamil dominated provinces (Northern and Eastern), the Sinhalese are in minority only in this district.

These two Tamil majority provinces, claimed by the Sri Lankan Tamils as their traditional homelands, are made up of seven administrative districts. Of all

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25. The traditional homeland concept could be identified from their historical settlement in Northern part of the island and its subsequent promotion to the separate kingdom of Tamils in the 13th century. Even after the Portuguese occupation, the northern Tamil area maintained its autonomy till 19th century.
the seven districts, the Sri Lankan Tamils form an overwhelming majority except Amparai district.26 The heartland of the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Jaffna district, accommodates 95.3 per cent of Sri Lankan Tamil population as against the Sinhalese share of mere 0.6 per cent. They also constitute a majority in the other northern districts such as Vavuniya (56.9 per cent), Mannar (50.6 per cent) and Mullaitivu (76 per cent).

In the Eastern province, the Sri Lankan Tamil representation is comparatively less than their absolute number in the North. Out of three districts in the East, they have over preponderance only in one district, the district of Batticaloa where they comprise 70.8 per cent of the district’s total population. The population of Trincomalee district is divided more or less equally among the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Sinhalese and the Moors. With regard to Amparai district, as mentioned earlier, the Moors are in majority and the Sri Lankan Tamils are in minority.

But in overall calculation, the position of the Sri Lankan Tamils in the Eastern province, despite their lack of uniform representation in all the three districts, is also comparatively higher. Here they constitute 41.9 per cent of the total population of the Eastern province. Both the Indian Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils collectively share 43.22 per cent of the total population of the Eastern Province. Other groups are the Moors with 31.90 per cent, the Sinhalese with 24.20 per cent and the rest 0.66 per cent. But in the Northern province, the Sri Lankan Tamils have the maximum of 87.56 per cent of the total provincial population. The total percentage of Tamils (both Sri Lankan and Indian) in Northern province is 92.73 per cent, as against the 2.69 per cent of the Sinhalese, 4.33 per cent of the Moors and 0.22 per cent of other

26. The Moors account for 41.6 per cent of Amparai district population and the Sri Lankan Tamils are minority. So here moors hold the first position.
The foregoing account of the ethnic distribution reveals a systematic compartmentalization of the country between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Of the total nine provinces, two provinces meant for the Tamils and the rest seven are Sinhalese provinces. Notwithstanding the minority status of the Tamils (both Sri Lankan and Indian) in the overall national context, they are the majority community in the Northern and Eastern provinces. In contrast to it, the well-managed economic system in the Tamil provinces with their firm control over cultivable lands placed them in a significant position. This creates economic disparity between the regions with the highest concentration of Tamils and regions where the Tamils are rather sparsely represented.

The economic variations may be the factor for the cultural superiority and inferiority among the Sri Lankan Tamils. Higher economic affluence of Northern and Eastern Tamils is neglected in their sophisticated life style which demonstrates amply the cultural upwardness generally. But the poor economic position of other Tamil sections indicate their cultural backwardness as compared to the former. An exception to this, the separation between Northern province Tamils and Eastern province Tamils could well be identified more on the criteria such as caste, education and historical tenure and less in terms of economic aspects.

Though the socio-economic and regional factors hardly make an impact on Indian Tamils internal division, their non-association with the Sri Lankan Tamils caused the creation of a separate identity of their own. In the contemporary Sri Lankan Society, however, these distinctions are usually not relevant and caste

conflicts and religious struggles have been eroded significantly. But the subsistence of these fervent characteristics led to another kind of tension which has come to be concentrated along ethnic lines, particularly between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils.

The Pre-Colonial History

The Buddhist chronicles *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa* form an outstanding recorded history of Sri Lanka. Sinhalese perception is framed on the basis of these chronicles and they attach more importance to it. Similarly for the Tamils, the Jaffna Kingdom is the symbol of a glorious past to which reference is made in the present demand for a separate state.

The Cola and Polonnaruva Kingdom

From about the third century B.C. until A.D. 1017, Anuradhapura was the capital of Sri Lanka. The most important event of this period was the introduction of Buddhism during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (307-267 B.C.). Buddhism, which in the course of time practically disappeared from India, the land of its origin, took deep roots in Sri Lanka and became an integral part of the island's culture and identity. The Anuradhapura period saw the growth of Sri Lanka's great Buddhist civilization, but it was also a period of considerable political instability. With the rise of Hindu states of the Pandyas, the Pallavas, and the Cholas in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., South Indian involvement in Sri Lanka's political affairs became endemic. Under Rajaraja the Great (985-1018) the Cholas sacked Anuradhapura and the capital was shifted to Polonnaruwa. Chola rule was short lived, for in 1070, the Sinhala King, Vijaya Bahu I was able to liberate the island. Polonnaruwa, however, was retained as t
The harmony that prevailed between the various ethnic groups in ancient Sri Lankan society was seriously impaired in the fifth and sixth centuries. The reason for this development, was the expansive politics of South Indian States, the Pandyas, Pallavas and Colas, which came to exercise their influence - directly or indirectly - over the island for several centuries. Sri Lanka, with its rich plains, was attractive for the Hindu states. In their own areas, Buddhism had been subdued, by which the old religious bonds between South India and the Sinhalese rulers and people were broken. The Tamils, on the other hand, became more conscious about their Dravidian origin, their culture, the Tamil language and the Hindu religion. Sri Lanka developed into a plural society with an uneasy existence of two distinct ethnic groups and occasional unrest.29

From the seventh to the eleventh century, the politics and culture of South India dominated Sri Lanka as well. The Sinhalese were repeatedly involved in warfare, either as ally or adversary to one or the other of these states. On some occasions, the Sinhalese participated in invasions on the Indian mainland, but more often during these centuries Sri Lanka was involved and subdued by South Indian Kingdoms. In 1070, the last of these holding power in Sri Lanka were ousted by Vijaya Bahu I.

His successor, Parakrama Bahu I, who ruled Polonnaruva 1153-1186 is famous for having unified Sri Lanka, carried out an active foreign policy, reformed the Sangha - the community of Buddhist monks, and for creating public and religious

monuments and a series of irrigation works, among which Parakrama Samundra Tank, Sea of Parakrama, is the most famous. Mingling with Buddhist decorative elements, one finds Hindu traits in the art which is considered as a proof of the strong position of both religions in the society during this period.

Tamfliah points to the fact that Nissanka Malla, the last Sinhalese king to rule from Polonnaruva, was actually a foreign king of Kalinga origin. Nissanka Malla is also renowned, not only for unifying the country, but for re-establishing and purifying the Buddhist religion. The transmission of the ideology of Buddhism, originally enshrined and eternalized in the epics, has taken place right from the ancient upto modern time. It has explicitly been the object of revival and manipulation by zealots and political activists for differing aims, pertinent to the particular circumstances of each time. 30

Around the middle of the thirteenth century the Sinhala kings abandoned Polonnaruva, due to a combination of factors including further South Indian invasions and the spread of malaria, and moved to the South West, while Tamil settlers from India began to occupy the Jaffna peninsula in large numbers. The Sinhalese kings then ruled from Dambadeniya, Yapahuwa, Kurunagala, Gampola and eventually from Kotte near Colombo. 31

During the period 1200-1500, five main developments can be traced: (1) the drift to the South West: (2) Change in the economic structure from irrigation-based rice cultivation to subsistence agriculture and trade as the main source of income: (3)


establishment and consolidation of a Tamil Kingdom in the north: (4) emergence of a separate political entity - the future Kandy kingdom in the centre and (5) the arrival of the Portuguese.

The Jaffna Kingdom

The Chapter Twenty-fourth of Mahavamsa, with its usual mystification of kings and events states that the Sri Lankan Tamils of today are the lineal descendants of the original inhabitants of the island. In the proto-historic period of the island the early totemistic Tamil tribes migrated from their homelands in South India and settled in the north, in the south-west around Kelaniya and in the south-east around the river Walawe Ganga. In the north, they founded a sovereign Kingdom called Naga Dipa. In the 2nd century AD, Ptolemy located the earlier Naga Dipa kingdom as covering the territory from Chilaw in the West to below Trincomalee in the east. The ancient Tamil name of the island was Tamaraparani. From those ancient times of the Naga Dipa kingdom, the Tamils have occupied the Northeastern littoral which is their exclusive homeland. To this ancient ancestry, the latter day invasions by the armies of the South Indian Tamil Pandyan, Chola and Chera kings and those raised by the usurping Sinhalese kings made successive additions.32

At the time of the introduction of Buddhism (3rd century BC), Tamil kingly rule kingdom was centred around Anuradhapura, the ancient capital which the Tamil kings founded. Devanampriya Theesan, the Tamil king at that time was followed by Senan and Kuddikan (177-155 BC) and by Ellalan (145-101 BC), which is a historical fact. Anuradhapura later became the seat of the Sinhalese dynasty. The history of the Tamil People in Sri Lanka after Ellalan’s death is lost in obscurity as, for the next

1000 years, the Pali chronicles describe only the struggles of the Sinhalese kings with
the invading South Indian Tamil forces. Hence, there is no continuous history of the
fortunes of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka until 1224, when an independent Tamil
kingdom with its capital in Jaffna, came into existence.33

From that time, Sri Lanka was divided into two ethno-linguistic nation states:
the Tamils in the north and east, and the Sinhalese in the South and West - the two
effectively separated by impenetrable jungles. These two ethno-linguistic nations
remained separate and isolated by reason of separate political loyalties and differences
in language, religion, culture and customs.

So, in the thirteenth century the Tamil kingdom of the north, known as the
Jaffna kingdom, was established with Jaffna as its centre. It continued to be an
independent and separate state till the end of the sixteenth century, except for a short
spell of dominance by the Sinhalese. The Jaffna kingdom, predominant Tamil state
with strong Hindu culture, was largely under the political influence of the major South
Indian state at that time. Concurrent with diminishing power of the Sinhalese ruler,
one notices the growing aspirations of the Tamil kingdom to subdue the Southwest and
Central regions. Evidently, the incentive was to extract as much taxes as possible
from these prosperous areas. According to Ibn Battuta, a North-African Muslim
traveller who visited Ceylon in 1344, the Tamil King Ariya Chakravarti, who had his
royal palace in Jaffna was a powerful ruler who owned sea-going vessels and a
cultured man who could converse in Persian.34

33. ibid., p.29.

During these centuries of turmoil a significant number of immigrants from South India settled in Sri Lanka. In fact during the Chola period, cordial and symbiotic interactions were taking place despite conquest. Incorporations of South Indians into the Sri Lankan society occurred at a different social level, i.e., as military settlements following recruitment to militia and soldier mercenaries from South India during the Polonnaruva rule, and later during the Kotte period. Places for worship of Hindu gods also emerged, guilds of craftsmen were organized and bonds established through dynastic marriages.35 Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries there was a continuous influx of immigrants to the southern and southwestern parts of Sri Lanka from South India: As in India, the King of Sri Lanka granted these various groups, arriving at different times, privileges and status as e.g., agriculturists-cum-soldiers, artisans, cinnamon peelers, toddy tappers, traders or fishermen. These were probably the ancestor 'clans' of the castes later referred to as Karava, Salagama, etc. A similar process of integration also took place at all levels of the hierarchy in the Kandyan Kingdom, which today represents the 'traditional past' of the Sinhalese. The enthronement in Kandy of the Nayyakkar kings is, therefore, the most spectacular feature of the South Indian connection. During the last quarter of the fifteenth century a new development evolved on the political scene of Sri Lanka. The Kandyans of the central region were to play a leading part in the political life of the country.

The Centuries of Colonial Rule

The advent of the Europeans and their political control of the different parts of the country and the Britishers' final conquest of the whole country greatly influenced its inhabitants. As a result, two significant developments came about in Sri Lankan

Society, new social cleavages along religious lines and the emergence of a new sophisticated power elite. This momentous development, therefore, needs a more detailed presentation.

**The Portuguese and Dutch Period**

When the Portuguese came to the island in 1505 there were three independent kingdoms in Sri Lanka viz., two Sinhalese kingdoms with their centres in Kotte and Kandy and the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna in the north. The Portuguese were initially less interested in territorial conquest than in controlling the island's lucrative cinnamon trade and in making conversions to catholicism. However, they were brought into local politics as a result of developments in Kotte which led to the partition of that kingdom in 1521.36

After his conversion to Catholicism, King Dharmapala of Kotte gifted his kingdom to the Portuguese monarch. Although the Portuguese dominance in the Indian Ocean was challenged by the Dutch in the beginning of the Seventeenth Century, their power in Sri Lanka was consolidated, and they accomplished full control of the Jaffna Kingdom in 1619. By this event, which was of great significance for the future, an independent Tamil kingdom ceased to exist in Sri Lanka and was not to rise again, neither under the Dutch nor the British. The former kingdom was from then on merely treated as part of a larger political entity.

Besides in the Jaffna kingdom the Portuguese were also establishing themselves in the Kandy kingdom. In 1619, a Treaty with the Queen of Kandy acknowledged Portuguese supremacy over the maritime districts of Sri Lanka. Through the annexation of Jaffna, the Portuguese controlled all ports of Sri Lanka.

except those of the east coast which were recognized as belonging to Kandy. The Portuguese, however, were also determined to conquer the main ports of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. After a futile resistance by the Kandyans the Portuguese control of the Ports were confirmed in a treaty of 1633.

The Kandyans at this point started soliciting the support of the Dutch for ousting the Portuguese. In 1638, the Dutch were allotted a monopoly of the spice trade and in addition promised repayment of costs involved in the warfare against the Portuguese. Disputes over the agreement surfaced already in 1640, but despite tense relations, the Kandyans joined the Dutch in their effort to drive out the Portuguese. The Fort of Colombo finally fell in 1656 and two years later the Portuguese lost Jaffna, their last bulwark in Sri Lanka. For the People of Sri Lanka, however, the consequences was only the replacement of one European power by another.\(^\text{37}\)

The Dutch soon established themselves in several of the rich cinnamon-producing areas. Their attempt to intrude into Kandyan controlled areas was, however, in vain. Instead a long span of peace followed, during which the Dutch were anxious to maintain good relations with the ruler of Kandy as their main concern was to obtain monopoly over the cinnamon trade. They were also aware of the strong ties - through the Buddhist religion - between the King of Kandy and the Sinhalese people. This consciousness was perhaps the reason why the Dutch continued as trustees of the Kandyan King in administering the areas under their control. In 1766, the Kandyans were forced to accept a Treaty which gave the Dutch the absolute authority over the territories earlier seized from the Portuguese.\(^\text{38}\)


\(^{38}\) *ibid*, p. 15.
Both these European powers arrived in Sri Lanka as benefactors and remained as conquerors. The introduction of Roman Catholicism to Sri Lanka was the most important consequence of the Portuguese era in Sri Lanka. In their effort to proselytize ruthless destruction of Buddhist and Hindu temples were conducted and the possessions were given to catholic orders. Also the Muslim population was prosecuted by the Portuguese. Adherence to the Catholic religion was compulsory for high-ranking indigenous officials during the Portuguese rule. On the credit side was the establishment of an educational system.

The Dutch administration was by far the better organized of the two, in part because it was supervised by Batavia, the Headquarters of the Dutch East India Company's Asian operations. The Dutch carried on the schools established by the Portuguese and also founded two seminars for higher education. Calvinism succeeded Roman Catholicism as the official religion in the Dutch territories, where through the Catholics became the main victims of the prosecution, the Hindus and the Muslims were not spared. The Buddhists, on the other hand, to a great extent escaped pursuit under the Dutch who did not want to provoke the Kandyan ruler unnecessarily.

Roman Catholicism had, however, a great popular appeal than Calvinism and survived years of harassment and subsequent period of indifference. Its adherents have through the last centuries, made up the majority of the Christians in Sri Lanka. The Dutch were often more exacting on the native population, and consequently, were more unpopular. The last influences of the Dutch include the establishment of Roman Dutch Law and Protestant Christianity, and their own contribution to the European element in the population of Sri Lanka. The descendants of Portuguese and Dutch settlers of this early period are the island's Burghers, a small but important
The British Rule

The Treaty of 1766 was ruinous for the Kandyans and they, therefore, once more sought foreign assistance to oust an alien enemy occupying almost their entire coast line. The British were at this time emerging as the great power of the sea and simultaneously consolidating their position in India. Trincomalee with its strategic position was easily of great interest to the British. In view of the escalation of the Anglo-French conflict the British were anxious to prevent the Dutch colonies in India and Sri Lanka to fall into the hands of the French. They were, therefore, in 1795 willing to negotiate with the Kandyans about support against the Dutch. Before the negotiations were completed, however, the British ousted the Dutch, without much assistance by the Kandyans, and the British took over the command of the littorals as successors of the Dutch.

The British soon became interested in establishing themselves in Kandy and took advantage of a succession dispute within the Kandyan aristocracy. Finally, in 1815 the Kandyan kingdom, the last bastion of the Sinhalese power, fell in the hands of the British. The Kandyan kingdom, which had remained independent throughout the periods of Portuguese and Dutch rule, was subjected to western colonial rule for the first time. In 1833, separate administration of the Kandyan territories came to an end and the entire island was brought under a uniform and centralised administrative system. Despite rebellions in the Kandyan areas in 1818 and 1848, the Nineteenth Century was a period of consolidation of British rule and steadily advancing British

economic and cultural penetration of the island. 4

For the British, Sri Lanka was only a strategic post for the defence of their colonies in India. Around 1830 the British had consolidated their power in India, and from that time great transformations of the economic, political and social life of Sri Lanka took place. The crown colony government which the British established in 1802 was authoritarian, with executive, legislative and judicial powers vested in the governor. The governor was assisted by an Advisory Council of British officials but he was not required to seek their advice. This rule of the governor was modified in 1833 as a result of the recommendations made by the Colebrook Commission.41 The governor was thereafter provided with an Executive Council of senior officials, which he was obliged to consult, and a Legislative Council, composed of nine official and six non-official members, the latter being nominated by the governor. Three of the six non-official members were to be Sri Lankans, and it became customary for the governor to nominate for these positions one low-country Sinhala, one Tamil and one Burgher. This was the beginning of ethnic representation, a source of much dissension among the communities in the early decades of the present century.

Apart from the establishment of Legislative Council several other radical reforms were introduced. A Civil Service was further organized, a uniform judicial system was introduced, and the Rajakariya system was abolished. All these reforms aimed at a unified administration for the country, and by changing the boundaries of the old Kandyan kingdom, it was endeavoured to erase the perception of a common nationality feeling among the Kandyans.

40. For details on the early years of British rule, see Colvin R. de Silva, Ceylon Under the British Occupation, 1795-1833 (Colombo, 1953). 2 vols.

The island's long exposure to foreign rule had serious implications for Buddhism, the traditional religion of the island's Sinhala population.

"An important consequence of the transfer of political power into alien hands as far as Buddhism in Ceylon was concerned, was the loss of the state patronage which it had enjoyed for centuries...under the Portuguese and the Dutch, the strength of the State machinery was not merely withdrawn from Buddhism: it was actively used against Buddhism on the side of Christianity". 42

From 1850 onwards there developed a conscious Buddhist response to the Christian missionary effort. This was organized and led by the Buddhist monks, the most prominent of whom were Hikkaduve Sumangala and Mohottivatte Gunananda. Some remarkable achievements in Buddhist and Pali studies by European scholars, such as T.W. Rhys David and George Turnour, gave educated Sri Lankans a new appreciation of the religion of their forefathers. In addition, it was the foreign theosophists, notably the American Henry Steele Olcott, who provided Sri Lankan Buddhists with the organizational know-how to combat Christian proselytizing. Thus, the Buddhist counter attack against Christian missionary activities produced a series of public debates in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century. This was the beginning of that militant Buddhism....aptly called "Protestant Buddhism"... for its explicit protest against Christian proselytizing and its implicit adoption of the missionary zeal, strict morality, and organizational forms of Protestant Christianity....that has continued to be evident in one form or another to the present day. 43


From the 1830s, Coffee succeeded Cinnamon as the main plantation crop and the principal export product, thereby transforming the economy into a monoculture. From 1850-1880, the coffee industry acted as a catalyst of the modernization of the economy of Sri Lanka. Plantations became the economic base for the unification of Sri Lanka, consolidating the process started by the administrative and legal reforms of 1832.

The plantation production required a much bigger labour force than was readily available among the local people. Indian workers, Tamils, were, therefore, recruited for the coffee industry, though only on seasonal basis. The tea production, however, necessitated the availability of a permanent and resident labour force. The Indian immigrants came as well to work in building and construction enterprises, such as roads, rails and harbours. By the end of the century, these Indian settlements had developed into a plantation and urban proletariat, which was segregated from the local population through religion, language and culture. It is also maintained that the Kandyan peasantry regarded the Indian Tamils as intruders, partly guilty of the landlessness caused by agricultural land being transformed into plantations. The problem was never as serious in the Kandy region as assumed. In this area, there was enough land for agricultural expansion by the local people in addition to the coffee plantations. The problem evolved in the low country during the last quarter of the century with the development of the rubber and coconut plantations. In this densely populated part of the country, the ratio of peasant and indigenous landholdings to population diminished.44

However, the fervor for reforms that followed after 1830, was reversed in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. The British administration then developed into

a conservative force and changed its policy vis-a-vis the Buddhist religion. Special privileges and liabilities towards the Buddhism were granted, and the authority and rights of the Kandyan aristocracy were restored. The new elite that emerged during the Nineteenth Century was an indigenous capitalist class. They had turned their landholdings into plantations, others invested in graphite mining for export or transport of coffee. The new liquor industry also gave high dividend. Through many missionary schools which had already been there since 1800, they were exposed to western education, and later generations of the new capitalist class sent their children to British Universities.

Another factor in the new enthusiasm for political reform was the political developments taking place in India. Sri Lankan leaders of the period around 1910 were practically all politically conservative, and this was reflected in their ready acceptance of the meagre reforms granted by the colonial office. However, there was soon to be a change in attitude brought about mainly by the 1915 riots.45

The liberalization of the constitution in the sub-continent could scarcely be expected to go unnoticed in Sri Lanka. The Montegu-Chelmsford proposals for India in 1918-19 only underlined the backwardness of Sri Lanka’s own constitution.46 The need for organized agitation became clearer. The earliest political organization of Sri Lankans was the Ceylon Agricultural Association founded in the mid-Nineteenth Century and in 1888 renamed the Ceylon National Association. However, this was not a rigorous organization and did not lead a movement for political reform. In 1917, Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a distinguished Sri Lankan who had served in


46. In the next Chapter the Constitutional Development in Sri Lanka is discussed in a historical perspective.
the three bastions of power ... the executive, the legislative councils and the civil service. founded the Ceylon Reform League. In 1919, this organization was superseded by the Ceylon National Congress, based on the Indian model, with Arunachalam, a Tamil, as its first President.

Sinhalese-Tamil Relations: The Impact of Colonialism

The inter-relationship of history and ethnicity largely determines the 'national question' in contemporary politics. This follows from the fact that ethnic identity and self-consciousness act as a binding force in the historical advancement of a group or a nation. In Sri Lanka, Western colonial rule underwent a long experience of 450 years starting from 1505. Imperialism continued uninterrupted, changing only in the nationality of the European masters, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. The most profound impact was made by the British. The British introduced certain changes which were to have a far-reaching impact on the ethnic relations in the Island. The entire island was unified under a single and centralized system of administration, thus for the first time "the two indigenous ethnic communities previously separated were brought under the umbrella of imperial rule."^{47}

Though the British Government pledged to continue royal protection of Buddhism, the traditional system, in which religion had played a major legitimizing and integrating role in the state, had come to an end. The bureaucratic colonial structure which the British erected was secular in its organization, purposes, and spirit, and had no essential connection to either Buddhism or Christianity.^{48}

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The establishment of a unitary form of government and the development of an extensive system of roads and railroads linking all parts of the island enabled members of the Sinhalese and Tamil Communities to come into contact with each other. The British Government abolished the three separate systems of administration and divided the country into five provinces on a territorial basis, such as Northern, Eastern, Southern, Western and Central Provinces. The number of provinces was later increased to nine by the addition of the North-Western, North-Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces. Each province was placed under the authority of a British Government agent who was appointed by the Governor of Ceylon. Each province was sub-divided into administrative district and administered by Assistant Government Agents. Administrative functions were subsequently decentralized at the district level, rather than at the provincial level, and each of the twenty-two administrative districts was placed under the charge of a government agent.\textsuperscript{49}

Then, the introduction of the plantation economy in the island brought in its wake the import of labour from South India. This immigrant labour "added a new dimension to the Sinhalese Tamil plurality" on the island. Further, missionary activity and administrative needs for English educated white collar workers from among the locals led to the establishment of English medium schools.\textsuperscript{50} Given the meagre resources of the water-deficient environment of northern Sri Lanka, the Tamils were compelled to seek alternative means of livelihood. By acquiring knowledge of the English language, they were able to secure a disproportionate share


\textsuperscript{50} Urmila Phadnis, \textit{"Sri Lanka : Crisis of Legitimacy and Integration"}, in Larry Diamond and Others, eds., \textit{Democracy in Developing Countries : Asia}, (Boulder, Colorado: 1989), vol.3, p.145.
of public employment in the British-run administration, even in the Sinhalese dominated areas, as well as in the Legal, Medical, and Engineering professions during colonial times. Nonetheless, the Sinhalese Community viewed all Tamils, irrespective of whether they resided in Tamil or Sinhalese dominated areas, as having an income higher than that of the Sinhalese population. Therefore, Sinhalese politicians demanded a large share of the economic resources of the country for their community in order that the consequences of inequalities between the two communities might be redressed.51

Some of the Sinhalese writers have drawn attention to the "historic enmity" between the Sinhalese and Tamil races and argued that the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil kings was racial. However, since many of these conflicts were essentially dynastic, they were political rather than racial. Nonetheless, the historical re-interpretation and following therefrom the perception and projection of majority-minority relations were such as to leave enough lee-way to underscore conflictual as well as cooperative facets of this historical interaction. Herein lay the importance of selecting symbols for identity assertion during the colonial as well as the post-colonial period by the leadership of the two communities.

Under the colonial rule, the Sinhalese and the Tamils participated in the political process, in economic activity and in national life as equal partners. So, there was considerable social intercourse and personal friendship due to the all-Island colonial administration. During this period, the local elites dominating the political scene, and the national consciousness being limited to a section, there was full cooperation to the colonial power.

51. C. Manogaran, op.cit., p.6.
Competitive Co-existence of Sinhalese and Tamils

During the British rule, the Sri Lankan Tamils without being threatened by the Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese revivalism, led the national movement to create an all-island national consciousness and seek concessions from the colonial administration. As representation in the Legislative Council was based on the principle of communal representation, the Governor nominated members of the Sri Lankan elite to represent the Burghers, Sinhalese, Indian Tamils Moors and Malay communities. But gradually in 1911, the Legislative Council was enlarged to include some "unofficial" members and with it a new platform came to be provided for the articulation of demands for further participation. Though the Sinhalese and Tamil elites had separate ethnic loyalties and identities, they merged them at least "temporarily subsumed by the desire for political consolidation." As a result, in the 1912 election to the Legislative Council, a Tamil named Sir P. Ramanathan got elected with the support of the majority Sinhalese. Further, it paved the way for the founding of the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) which dominated Sri Lanka's politics till independence.

Despite the growing assertion of their separate identities, Sinhalese - Tamil relations did not assume a conflictual nature, during the colonial period. Upto 1922, the Tamils did not regard themselves as a minority but "as one of the two majority groups in the Island," and even worked along with the Sinhalese to put forward their political demands. In these political activities, the Tamils often took the lead. Thus, when Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan was the first Ceylonese to get elected to the


Legislative Council, his brother Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam was the President of the Ceylon Reform League in 1917 and of the Ceylon National Congress 1919. The CNC itself was a multi-communal, multi-class party consisting of Sinhalese and Tamil elite. Its formation marked the high point in Sinhalese-Tamil cohesion.

But, the constitutional reforms in 1920 seriously affected the unity among the Sinhalese and Tamils as a whole. Ethnic rivalry became an issue when the British Government began giving serious consideration to greater Ceylonese participation in the political process. Sinhalese politicians insisted that communal representation, which had hitherto been the vehicle through which Ceylonese participated in the colonial government, be replaced by some form of territorial representation that would be reflective of the size of the Sinhalese community relative to that of the Tamils. Tamils’ demands to retain communal representation were rejected.

It introduced territorially elected representation and enlarged the Legislative Council with an unofficial majority. This made the Sinhalese think in terms of their numerical strength and the need to appeal to their own constituencies and elections. Hence during the 1920 elections, the Sinhalese leadership went back on its earlier pledge of support to the Tamils. In response, the Tamils broke away from Congress and formed their own segregated political group known as the Tamil Maha Sabha, making the beginning of Sinhalese-Tamil elite rivalry. Thus, the introduction of territorial representation, the elective principle and segregated formations gave rise to mobilization of the respective ethnic communities for political purposes.

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Gradually, Sinhalese leaders thinking was centred around the concept of a Sinhala nation with no concern for the other social and religious communities and also future integration of the country. Further with the Donoughmore Commission's Constitutional reforms in the nature of universal adult franchise and territorial representation, the majority Tamils got a raw deal. Justifying the territorial representation, the Commission report said, "Territorial electorates, drawn with no eye to the distribution of communities, mean rule by the majority community with no safeguards for minorities, while safeguards for the minorities inevitably deepen the division of the nation on communal lines."

In the absence of secular political parties, the reforms suggested by the Commission, were not feasible. The Commission's starting point was that the people of Sri Lanka are one nation, divided into a number of communities. So the Commission failed to come to accommodate with all important national questions. Because in reality "Sri Lanka is one country, a politico-geographic entity with two nations (Sinhalese and Tamils) and five communities such as Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Muslims, Indian Muslims, Burghers and Malays."

In 1931 elections, Tamil leaders refrained from contesting in protest, but, the Sinhalese leaders participated in favour of new franchise in place of communal electorates. The Commission's recommendations for "devolution of power to district councils indicate that it addressed its mind to the question though it failed to comprehend the nationality structure in Sri Lanka. Following the General Elections of 1936, the Sinhalese leaders constituted a "pan-Sinhalese" ministry without any

Tamil representation for the purpose of securing unanimity to press the imperial power to make concessions towards self-government. There was again a significant development during 1937 which directly related to the formation of the "Sinhala Maha Sabha" (The Great Council of the Sinhalese) by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike with greater appeal for the Sinhalese unity and solidarity. He was the son of a prominent Anglican layman who had been knighted by the British Sovereign. He was educated at St. Thomas College, Colombo and at Oxford. Along with other politically ambitious young men, he became a convert to Buddhism after the 1931 Donoughmore Constitutional Reforms granted universal franchise. Bandaranaike explained the rationale behind the formation of the new organization:

"We (the Sinhalese Maha Sabha) saw differences amongst our own people - caste distinctions, up country and low-country distinctions, religious distinctions - and we, therefore, felt that we should achieve unity which is the goal of us all. Surely, the best method was to start from the lowest rungs: firstly unity among the Sinhalese; and secondly, whilst uniting the Sinhalese, to work for higher unity, the unity of all communities."

The formation of the Sinhalese Maha Sabha in turn compelled G.G. Ponnambalam to form the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress in 1944 to champion the cause of the Tamils against Sinhala-Buddhist domination. Gradually, with this widening rift and discriminatory policies against the Tamils, the country moved towards self-rule with the drafting of a constitution by the Lord Soulbury Commission on constitutional reforms. The fears of Sinhala domination was so intense that the Tamil


Congress leader G.G. Ponnambalam advocated that one-half of the seats in the new legislature be reserved for the minorities, so that the Sinhalese majority would not hold more than fifty per cent of the seats in the legislature. Hence this balance would be reflective in the executive and in a way would serve as a check against discriminatory legislation.\textsuperscript{60}

With the increasing ceylonization of the bureaucracy and the technical services, competition among the Sinhalese Tamils and Burghers grew. While most of the posts for Ceylonese were held by the Sinhalese, the number of positions held by the Tamils and Burghers were much larger than that warranted by their numbers. As many Burghers migrated abroad, the competition was reduced to that between the Sinhalese and Tamils.\textsuperscript{61}

Despite this competition, the situation had not yet turned explosive since "the power cake was big enough to accommodate the elite of the minority communities. "It was only a decade after independence that the "ethnic cleavage assumed a critical salience in the political process of Sri Lanka."\textsuperscript{62}

**Religious Revivalism, Growth of Modern Nationalism and Demand for Independence**

During the period 1870-1900, Sri Lanka experienced a re-awakening of the Buddhism with a demand for its values to be reinstated to its old supremacy. It aimed at rescuing the Sinhala-Buddhist culture from the degeneration it had suffered under the British. Anagarika Dharmapala was the renowned leader of the Sinhala Buddhist

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\textsuperscript{60} The more detailed discussion about Lord Soulbury Commission and Ponnambalam’s ‘fifty-fifty’ formula is made in the next Chapter.

\textsuperscript{61} For details see de Silva (London, 1986), \textit{op.cit.} pp. 84-96.

\textsuperscript{62} Phadnis, \textit{op.cit.}, 1989, p. 146.
revivalism. This religious force was a reaction to the Christian missionary activities, but also included political aspects related to the country’s indigenous past. It criticized the decadence of the society fostered by the British and compared it to the “glorious” culture that had flourished under the Sinhalese kings. In preaching the restoration of Sinhalese Buddhist culture, the leaders of the movement “were advocating their own return to prominence in the life of the society under the state.” They resented the social, economic and political privileges enjoyed by the Christians and attempted to secure a greater share in the powers and privileges of colonial society. In 1883, a violent communal riot broke out for the first time between the Buddhists and the Catholics. The resentment was articulated in the anti-Christian upsurge of the Nineteenth Century, the campaign in Anuradhapura in 1903, and the temperance movement of 1904 and 1912. These were directed against foreign religious and ethnic groups, but not against the Sri Lankan Tamilians. This anti-Christian British feeling, however, remained at a religio-cultural level and did not mature into a full fledged nationalist movement.

The ideology of the movement revolved around three elements: the Sinhalese language, the Buddhist religion and the Sinhalese "people" as an "Aryan race". The concept of "alien trader", as contrasted to the "sons of the soil", was propagated by Dharmapala, directing his attacks especially against the Muslim traders. In 1915, severe Muslim-Sinhalese riots broke out, which were harshly crushed by the British.

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66. Tambiah, op.cit., p.70.
An ideology based on such concepts was bound to have tremendous impact on ethnic relations. It generated among the Sinhalese a self-perception of their role as protectors of their language, religion and race. As according to myth, the Sinhalese were the earliest inhabitants of the island, they were the legitimate "protectors" of the island. Consequently, all migrants were "foreigners", while the ideology was strong enough to bring the majority of the Sinhalese within its fold, it was equally potent in excluding those speaking languages other than the Sinhala and professing a religion, other than Buddhism. 67

A generation earlier than the Buddhist revivalism, Hinduism experienced a recovery. This was also a response to the rise of Christianity and the encroachment of the missionaries, who had been more successful in Jaffna than in the rest of the country. So the Hindu revivalist movement was directed against the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries and sought to promote a consciousness and cultural awakening among the Tamils. Arumuga Navalar became the influential leader of the Hindu revivalism. He endeavoured to stop conversions of Hindus to Christianity. The second part of his work was devoted to the preservation of orthodox form of Saivism, through restoration of Hindu temples and publication of Saivite religious texts. A great importance was given for preservation of Hindu ideals and heritage. In the process, the distinctiveness of the Tamil Community was emphasized, having implications for majority-minority relations in the political realm. Being an orthodox movement, the Hindu revivalism did little though, to lessen the rigidity of the caste system. Not until after independence did the position of the "harijans", the `untouchables', improve.

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The Muslims, too, sought to preserve their religion and culture from the Christian influence and promoted a self-consciousness among the community. They had demonstrated even stronger resistance towards Christianity than the Buddhists and the Hindus. The educational opportunities offered through the missionary schools were perceived as a potential erosion of their faith. By refusing to send their children to English schools, their community was left behind in the competition for social and economic benefits, accrued to them through the educational process. This conservative seclusion of the Muslim community was challenged by the more enlightened Muslims, like Orabi Pasha, an Egyptian exile. The most prominent leader of the revivalism of the Muslim community was, however, M.C. Siddi Lebbe, who emphasized the importance of education as a way to revive the Muslim community. Contrary to the Buddhist resurgence, the Hindu and Muslim revivalist movements were both remarkably void of political overtones in the form of anti-British attitudes.

Thus, the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim revivalist movements arose as a reaction to the dominance of the Christians. In this, they were not antagonistic to each other. Yet the movements helped strengthen the separate identities of the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims.

The loyalty towards the colonial power remained intact among the Western educated elite brought up with the British liberal ideas. In particular this was the case with the Burghers, being mainly Christians, and working in the colonial administration. In 1919, the Ceylon National Congress was established, and from the


inception it was dominated by the conservative elite, constitutionalists. The British response to the request for sharing of power, was initiated in the 1920s, as 'Reform in Stages'. The composition of the Legislative Council was changed and the elective principle was practised, first on a limited scale (1920), and since 1923 a majority of unofficial members participated - with a large elective element and on a communal basis. Subsequently, the Sinhalese requested extended representation on the territorial principle, the Tamils and other groups insisted that communal representation should be maintained.

The working class, however, was from the 1930s divided into two distinct groups, the immigrant workers, including the Indian Tamils and the Malayalis and the Sinhalese workers. Gonnesinha who in the 1920s was championing the rights of the Indian workers, made a volte-face and regressed into chauvinism, propagating against minority rights. The Lanka Sama Samaj Party (LSSP), the first left party in Sri Lanka, founded in 1935, together with the communist party, emerging in the 1940s, clearly took the stand for Malayalis, and became identified as parties of the minorities. 70

Universal adult franchise was introduced in 1931, with 'the Donoughmore Reforms' and the principle of communal representation was abolished. Despite the inclusion of certain safeguards for minority communities, the Tamils felt that the new constitution would expose them to the domination of the Sinhalese. They, therefore, urged for a so-called balanced representation", implying that fifty percent of the seats in the legislature should be retained by the country's minority communities. The All Ceylon Tamil Congress, the principal political instrument of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

was formed in 1943, with the object of promoting the Tamil claims. The on-going tug of war between the Sinhalese and the minority communities, led to the creation in 1937 of the Sinhala Maha Sabha (the Great Council of the Sinhalese), under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The Sinhalese, anxious to improve the conditions of their electorate, interpreted the Tamil claims as a hindrance on the road to self-government. A political compromise was, however, reached by the Sinhalese and Tamil leaders, D.S. Senanayake and G.G.Ponnambalam. The Soulbury Constitution was accepted, implying the concept of a secular state and a parliamentary system along the Westminster model, although with added guarantees against discriminative legislation. This finally culminated in the independence of Sri Lanka.
Table 1: Ethnic Communities in 1981

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<th>Ethnic Communities</th>
<th>Sri Lanka Number</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Northern and Eastern Provinces</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Ethnic Communities Represented in Northern and Eastern Provinces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14,850,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>2,087,943</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinhalese</td>
<td>10,989,000</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>276,578</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lankan Tamils</td>
<td>1,871,000</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>1,358,188</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>72.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Tamils</td>
<td>817,000</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>76,754</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>9.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims (Moors)</td>
<td>1,054,000</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>368,277</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>34.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others b</td>
<td>119,000</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>8,146</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>6.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


a These two provinces were approximately 26 percent of the total area of the island in 1978.

b Includes Burghers (Eurasians) and Malays.

---

Table 2. Population by Religion in Sri Lanka, 1981

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Religions</td>
<td>14,850,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>10,291,000</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>2,302,000</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims (Moors)</td>
<td>1,128,000</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>1,114,000</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population '000</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>2,759.8</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>3,007.8</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>3,566.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>4,106.4</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>4,498.6</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>5,306.9</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>6,657.3</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>8,097.9</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>10,582.0</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>12,689.8</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>14,850.0</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Department of Census and Statistics in Bastian, 1986.