Ethnic differences have become the single most important source of large-scale violence in post-colonial plural societies. The key feature of ethnic violence is the widespread violations of human rights. Incidentally, it is after the Second World War that the protection of human rights has become a global concern; the United Nations and a host of international human rights instruments provide a politico-legal framework. Consequently, the States which committed human rights violations have faced immense pressure to ensure their protection.

The focus of the present study is on both human rights violations and protection in Sri Lanka. It analyses various dimensions of human rights violations in the island State as a result of ethnic violence. The protective mechanisms available at both internal and international levels are also examined. In the process, the study intends to answer the following questions: What are the political, economic, socio-cultural and international underpinnings of violence by both the Sri Lankan State and the Tamil militants? Why Sri Lanka, which was once a model for third world democracy, has become one of the countries with poor human rights records? What are the various dimensions of human rights violations as a result of ethnic violence? What the forces involved in such violations? What are the various available mechanisms for human rights protection in the island? Are they effective? If not, why? What is the role of international community in human rights safeguards in Sri Lanka? How does the international pressure work? And, what are the steps taken by the Sri Lankan government in maintaining good human rights record as a result of such pressure? In this context, the present study seeks to test the following two hypotheses: First, "the gap between theory and practice of human rights is wider
in countries affected by ethnic violence.” Second, “international pressure works as an effective mechanism to check human rights abuses, especially in small states.”

The lack of any comprehensive work linking ethnic violence and human rights in the Sri Lanka has provided the impetus to this study. At the same time, I knew fully well the constraints of getting materials because of the sensitivity of the subject. Undeniably, large amount of literature is available on Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict in general (Abeysekara and Gunasinghe, 1987; Bose, 1991; Chattopadhyaya, 1994; de Silva, 1986, 1998; Gamage and Watson, 1999; Hoole, 1992 and 2001; Jupp, 1978; Kearney, 1967; Manor, 1984; Phadnis, 1976; Piyadasa, 1984; Ponambalam, 1983; Ram, 1989; Roberts, 1996; Sabaratnam, 1996). Also, several studies have been done on ethnic violence (Asia Watch, 1987; CRD, 1984; Das, 1990; Dissanayaka, 1983; Kapferer, 1988 and 1994; Piyadasa, 1984; Ramanathan, 1916; Suriyakumaran, 1990; Tambiah, 1986 and 1992, 1996; Vittachi, 1958, Jegannath, 1998; Kearney, 1975; Obeysekere, 1984; Spencer, 1990). Similarly, many authors have analysed general human rights situation in Sri Lanka (Senewiratne, 1984; Sri Lanka Foundation, 1982; Wickremasknghe, 1997; Bastian, 1992; Deshapriya, 2002; Fernando, 1995; Gomez, 1997; Hyndman, 1992). However, no full length study linking ethnic violence and human rights is undertaken so far. The present study is an attempt to fill the gap in the literature.

Though the scope of the analysis is limited to post-independence period, developments in the colonial period were included in appropriate places and contexts. Ethnic violence between the Sinhalese and the Muslims is not included in this study. Human rights abuses resulting from ethnic violence are alone examined and other general human rights violations are excluded.

The present study is divided into six chapters. Apart from defining the key concepts like ‘ethnic violence’ and ‘human rights’, Chapter I constructs an
analytical framework. It deals with the patterns of violence by both the state and non-state actors and the consequent various dimensions of human rights violations in multi-ethnic societies. Here, the emphasis is on the ethno-centric states. The available human rights safeguard mechanisms at both national and international levels is also identified.

Chapter II examines the origin, forms and patterns of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. Though the origin is traced to the fifties, the emphasis is given to the developments in the eighties. Forms (such as communal violence and ethnic war) and patterns of ethnic violence are critically analysed for the assessment of its implications for human rights. In this context, the specific role of the state and insurgent groups is critically examined. The element of ethnicity, which is the fundamental factor in violence, is examined.

Chapter III focuses on various dimensions of human rights violations in Sri Lanka as a result of ethnic violence. In this, the specific role of security forces, Tamil militant outfits, organised groups aided by the State and State institutions in the violation of human rights is analysed. Different mechanisms that exist within Sri Lanka for protection of human rights is examined in Chapter IV. These mechanisms include judiciary, legislature, Ombudsman, Presidential Commission of Inquiry, Human Rights Commission, Media and the civil society. The constraints under which these groups work are also critically examined. Chapter V deals with various external pressures that are working on the Sri Lankan State and the militants to prevent human rights abuses. The effective external pressures come from the inter-governmental organisations like the United Nations, the Aid Consortium of Sri Lanka, individual donor countries, international human rights NGOs, international media and the world public opinion. While summing up the
discussions, the concluding chapter (Chapter VI) finds out the trends in Sri Lanka's human rights policy and the ways to maintain good human rights record.

The study is based on 'historical-analytical' method. The required data for the study was collected from both primary and secondary sources. In this regard, the human rights reports by various national and international organisations, country reports on human rights and government documents provided valuable information. Besides, data was also collected through extensive interviews with human rights activists, lawyers, academics, security forces personnel, government officials, prisoners, former and present militants and political leaders during the candidate's field visit to Sri Lanka in September-October 2001. Various books and articles on ethnic conflict and human rights in general and Sri Lanka in particular were also consulted to broaden the understanding of the subject.