INTRODUCTION
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Most of the states in the present-day international system, irrespective of the nature of their polity, economy and culture, have experienced problems of integration and adaptation in one way or other. Ethnocentric movements resulting from economic and socio-cultural discriminations constitute one of the major sources of conflicts in the Third World leading to civil wars, liberation struggles and even disintegration of states. This phenomenon could be seen not only in the developing countries of Asia and Africa but also in the developed as well as in the erstwhile socialist states. Thus a major challenge of the ruling elites in many of these states has been how to address such struggles, conflicts and ethnocentric movements.

An ethnic question often arises as a consequence of the programmes and policies of the states. This may transform itself into a national/subnational question leading to struggles for self-determination. The question of Tamils in Sri Lanka is illustrative of such a scenario. However, most of the studies dealing with the Tamil ethnicity and militancy in Sri Lanka tend to deal with political dimensions and deterioration of inter ethnic relations without focusing sufficiently on the historical experience of the people of Sri Lanka in its long term trajectory. This study tries to fill this gap by examining the political and economic dimensions of the Tamil question within a broad socio-historical setting of the experience of different communities in Sri Lanka.

Profile of the problem

Sri Lanka has been experiencing inter-ethnic conflicts ever since it achieved independence in 1948. These conflicts have taken dangerous dimensions in certain occasions threatening the very survival of the social fabric of the country. At the heart of this
problem lies the question of Tamil minority who always felt suppressed and marginalized by the Sinhala majority. The crisis situation has been worsened with the social, economic and political subjugation by the successive governments in Colombo. However, the genesis of this problem could be traced back to the eightieth century when Britain ousted the Dutch power and established its rule. By making treaties and agreements with local kings, the British expanded their control all over the Island. This helped develop and sustain the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic identities. Through the introduction of representation in legislative councils on ethnic and communal lines, the colonial government kept the difference between the two communities alive and prevented the growth of any inter-ethnic, all-Island political identification.

The estate system of plantations established by the British capital produced fundamental socio-economic changes in Sri Lanka. The new export economy was linked to the imperial network and controlled by the metropolis. It was virtually dependent on foreign trade, capitalist production, a permanent labour force and low wages – a structure which was against the self-sufficient rice growing village economy. Large areas of mid and up country lands were declared Crown land and sold to coffee planters. The local elites created by the plantation capitalism and commercialisation of economy influenced the policies of the government. These policies apparently went against the poorer sections of the society. All these had a deeper impact on the socio-economic structure of Sri Lanka.

The state formation in the postcolonial Sri Lanka manifested itself in its development trajectory that had been swinging from an outward looking economy to an inward looking economy and back to an outward looking economy. This could be explained as a colonial mode of production to an indigenous capitalist sector and finally to an imperial mode of production in the form of investment
promotion zones. To state it clearly, the outward looking strategy incorporated the imperial mode of production and an inward looking growth strategy incorporated the capitalist mode of production.

The first post independence United National Party (UNP) government in Sri Lanka failed to discern the vulnerability of the export economy that the country inherited from the colonial rule. The conservative forces that the UNP government represented at that time did not perceive the transformation of economic structure to be a pressing concern. Hence the crisis tendencies set in the economy persisted and half of the food requirements had to be imported. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government that came to power later went in for the nationalization of industries, plantations etc. but they proved to be uneconomic and inefficient. In the 1970s, again, a change to an open economic policy inviting foreign investment was felt inevitable.

During the years after independence, economic development of the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka was largely ignored. These provinces had a relatively poor resource base and large areas of arid land remained ill-suited for agriculture. Besides, it was alleged that the state expended assistance to Sinhala capital and discriminated against Tamil capital in the industrialisation process. The control of the state in the import substitution phase and its highly sectarian attitude against the Tamil capital was clearly evident in the case of non monopoly capital. The Tamil non monopoly capital did not emerge in the light industries in the absence of Sinhala capital. However, with the opening of the economy, non monopoly capitalism in the industry suffered most. The crisis created by the opening up of the economy manifested itself most unfortunately in violence. The resulting cleavage between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka had so widened that a
mere political solution in terms of decentralization of political power was apparently not delivering good.

After independence, power was always invested with either the UNP or the SLFP. The policies of these two parties, whenever they were in power, had not been helpful to sustain the Tamil interests. On the other hand, successive governments were pursuing policies to realize the Sinhalese interests, and thereby marginalising the Tamil minority. The Citizenship Act of 1948 was the first blow on the Tamils. By this, nearly a million Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin were deprived of citizenship and they became stateless. These plantation Tamils were the largest component in the organized working class in the country who had already displayed unexpected social solidarity. This forced the middle upper class Sinhalese to turn against the Tamil working class.

Then came the ‘Sinhala Only Act’ in 1956, through which Sinhala became the official language put forward by the SLEP government. The support base of SLFP was the Sinhala middle class consisting of Buddhist monks and Sinhalese educated class. This class had long felt neglected by the westernized rulers. They mobilized their members for effective political action to redress their grievances. They felt that once their language was declared as official language, they would get more opportunities in public service employment. But this created serious misgivings among English educated Tamils. When the Bandaranayake government introduced standardisation programme in 1970, the Tamils felt further alienated. The Sinhala colonization of the Tamil populated areas and the economic subjugation of the Tamil regions only worsened the already volatile situation.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, even as the Tamil Federal Party leadership had complained about the ‘broken promises,’ it had adhered to its demand for federal system. In the debate which
followed on the new constitution during 1970-72, the Tamil parties confronted with the brute majority of the ruling front, felt that the government had virtually set aside all their demands, whether in the realm of language or culture or federalism or at least the grant of regional autonomy within a unitary framework. In fact, in 1972, the Tamil United Front (TUF) had presented the government with a six point demand to reconsider the Constitution in the light of these issues. These included granting the status of official language to Tamil, granting citizenship to the ‘Indian Tamil’, granting equal status to all religions, abolition of untouchability and, last but not the least, decentralization of power. The front informed the government that in the event of non-compliance with these demands, it would have no option but to launch a non-violent direct action against the government.

The single platform of Tamil parties, Tamil United Front [TUF], included Federal Party, the Tamil Congress, and Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), an organization of Indian Tamils. Increasingly, the TUF started sending separatist demands. This extreme position was partly dictated by the promulgation of the new constitution and partly by the growing pressure generated by the impatient Tamil youth. The TUF, as the final attempt to set their demands accepted by the governments warned the government that rejection of their demand would lead to direct action. The government, however, did not pay any heed to these demands. In protest Chelvanayakam resigned from his seat in parliament and was re-elected in 1976 under an election promise of a free, sovereign, secular state of ‘Tamil Eelam.’ At its national convention held in 1976, the TUF was renamed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) keeping in view the new demand of the party. This convention was historic since it marked a radical shift in the Tamil demand from equality to an assertion of freedom, from fundamental rights to self-
determination from the acceptance of a pluralistic experiment to
the surfacing of a new corporate identity.

The Tamil politics thus came to be radicalized in the seventies with
the intervention of young Tamils who had been seriously affected
by the discriminatory policies of different governments and had lost
their confidence in the moderate Tamil leadership. And, since then,
they had been engaged in armed struggle against the state
authorities. Injustice and unequal terms of social relations
perpetuated by the Sinhala-dominant governments led to the
emergence of various Tamil militant movements. Even though
these movements had a common agenda i.e. to achieve a Tamil
homeland (Eelam), they stood divided on the question of ideology
and strategies to be employed in different contexts. Thus the group
rivalry became a part of Tamil movements. It is in this context that
the scope and implications of these militant groups in advancing
the Tamil cause are examined.

Most of the writers accepted the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
(LTTE) as the first militant group which came to the forefront to
advance the Tamil question. LTTE’s main contention was that
neither the TULF nor the left movement had offered any concrete
political venue to the revolutionary potential of the rebellious
youth. They also alleged that the strategy of traditional left parties
was to collaborate with the Sinhala capitalist class and, therefore,
their theoretical perspective was subsumed by the hegemonic
ideology of that dominant class. The LTTE was ideologically
oriented to Marxism-Leninism and had chartered its political
programme integrating national struggle with class struggle
defining their ultimate objective as national liberation and socialist
revolution. Anyhow, they sought to achieve total independence of
Tamil Eelam and thereby the establishment of a sovereign, socialist,
democratic people’s governments.
There were other organizations like Peoples Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) etc. who were also committed to Maximum-Leninism. However, their ideological pronouncements were seen as intended only to attract the Tamil youths into their ranks. Even while militant wings of these groups were engaged in armed struggle, some initiatives were taken by their political wings for conflict resolution. All ended up in failure. India’s intervention in the conflict in the 1980s only complicated the situation. Thus, no concrete political solution was forthcoming. Meanwhile, the state apparatus resorted to extraordinary military campaigns against the Tamil militants which resulted in an unprecedented violation of human rights leading to the eventual liquidation of the LTTE in 2009.

Review of Literature

There is an impressive store of literature on the Tamil question in Sri Lanka and its ethnic and militant dimensions. There are several books and articles written on the historical antecedents of the Tamil question, looking at from the historical as well as from the political economy angle. The scholars who have attempted to examine the Tamil question also derived theoretical insights from the works of a large number of writings by Brass (1991), Weber (1997), Smith (1987), van den Berghe (1991), Gurr (1994), Gurr & Harff (1994) et al. The conflicts and tensions are also analysed from the point of view of war of secession, national question, civil war etc by scholars like Jayewardene (1985), Tambiah (1986), Ponnambalam (1983), Seevaratnam (1989), Wilson (1988) and Ghosh (2003).


What makes the present study different from other studies is its diachronic approach in situating the Tamil question in a broader historical setting with a view to explaining the problem in its contemporary context.

Focus of Study

The study seeks to examine the political and economic dimensions of the Tamil question against the background of the history and development of the Sri Lankan State. Here the following points merit a rigorous analysis:
The status of Tamils in the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial conditions.

The dynamics of inter-ethnic relations during the colonial and postcolonial situations.

Policies of the colonial apparatus and their implications for ethnic cleavages.

Political economy of the Sri Lankan state and its implications for social development.

Political economy as well as the cultural dynamics of the Tamil question.

Socio-economic prime movers of the Tamil militancy.

Ideology and strategy of the Tamil movements.

Hypotheses

The study proceeded with the following surmises:

1. The Tamil question has apparently emerged in the context of spatially unequal and temporarily uneven capitalist development in Sri Lanka.

2. The ethnic conflicts appear to have their roots in the colonial setting, but they have had wider dimensions in the postcolonial conditions.

3. The socio-economic programmes of the successive governments in Sri Lanka seem to have accentuated assimilationist tendencies and thereby discriminated against the Tamils.

4. The advancement of the Tamil question was apparently circumscribed by the divergent trends within the Tamil politics.
5. The Tamil militant groups were instrumental in transforming the Tamil question into a discourse of Tamil nationalism with their ideological apparatus.

6. The ethnic conflicts seem to have strengthened the hands of the Sri Lankan State, and thereby the Tamil militancy as well as the State responses tended to worsen human rights violations in the Island.

**Chapter Scheme**

The study has been divided into six chapters, besides an introduction outlining the scope, rationale and problem areas of the investigation. The first chapter provides a profile of the society and culture in Sri Lanka tracing its challenges during colonial and postcolonial periods. The second chapter outlines the development trajectory of Sri Lanka within the colonial mode of production as well as in the background of the postcolonial conditions. The genesis of the Tamil problem is also traced here. The third chapter focuses on the Tamil question and its politico-economic undercurrents after independence. The fourth chapter catalogues the ethnic conflicts and the state intervention in the 1970s and 1980s. The fifth chapter analyses the ideology and strategy of the Tamil militancy, and its consequences. The sixth and final chapter brings together the findings and observations.

**Methodology**

The study is carried out within a historical-analytical method. The source materials are wide ranging, from documents and publications of Sri Lankan government to the reports and documents of different Tamil militant groups. Secondary sources will also be used for documentation, investigation and further analysis.