CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Ethnicity has been a recurring phenomenon in world politics for a long time. Contrary to the expectation that ethnic and provincial identities would disappear as the process of modernisation would get underway, the world has witnessed a proliferation of ethnocentric and religious movements across nations and regions. This phenomenon is, however, not peculiar to non-Western world. Rather, both the developed and developing countries have encountered this challenge in various forms. In Asia and Africa, ethnocentric movements have gained momentum over the last five decades. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the East European socialist states also set off ethnic conflicts and movements to spread throughout its territory. In sum, ethnicity, far from disappearing, has now become a subject of concern in the social and political discourses of every country and every region in the world.

The historical experience reveals that ethnicity itself could, in many ways, be a product of modernisation rather than serving as a factor hindering modernisation. Indeed, the phenomenon of ethnicity is a critical challenge in multi-ethnic states in most of the countries of the world. The centrality of ethnic cleavages in the operation of multi-ethnic states is now recognised by all. The relation between ethnicity and social conflicts has also been a major subject of studies in social sciences. Paul Brass (1991) says that an ethnic community is a category of people whose have developed an awareness and common identity and have sought to demarcate boundaries. A community transforms into a nationality or nation when it mobilizes for political action and gets political importance. Brass stresses on the role of elites and their competition and struggle as the basis for ethnic group’s political demands.
According to Anthony Smith (1991), an ethnic community is constituted with a myth of common ancestry, shared memories, and cultural elements, besides with a historic territory or homeland and a measure of solidarity. Max Weber did not believe that shared ethnicity of itself leads to group formation. It only facilitates group formation, particularly in the political sphere. Weber saw united political action as central to the dynamic of ethnicity. He had a strong sense of the role of history in shaping ethnic groups, which he said as having memories of a common past, attachment to a clearly demarcated territory and certain traditions or ways and life. He also recognised the experience of migration in the history and consciousness of ethnic nations. For Smith and many others, however, ethnicity is a historically contingent social construct. It is socially constructed/reconstructed as people respond to the changing social conditions, power relations, and relations among groups shaping a specific time and place. Thus, the critical insights on ethnicity provide immense scope for understanding the complex challenges of state building and nation building processes in the modern world. It is in this background that the Tamil question in Sri Lanka has been analysed.

It is quite evident that there is a deep socio-historical context for the Tamil question in Sri Lanka. Pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial conditions of Sri Lanka obviously played a crucial role in transforming this as a major challenge to the nation building process, which the Tamil militant groups called as ‘national question.’ The development dynamics of the Sri Lankan state, socio-economic policies of successive governments, the State intervention, and the role of militant organisations were the most critical factors in the making of Tamil question.

The Sinhalese and Tamils are the two major ethnic segments of the society that constitute this multi-ethnic Island of Sri Lanka today. For these communities, their languages have long been the most
determining factors of their identity. However, the Sinhalese have invoked the chronicles of history and culture to claim that their ancestors were the Aryans from north India who came to the Island before the advent of Buddhism. They have their own legends and myths to support this claim. The Tamils also asserted that they were the descendants of the Dravidians of south India who inhabited the Island before Buddhism established itself in the Island. To support their claim of ancestry, the Tamils also used the story of Naga and Yaksha people who belonged to the legend Ravana of the epic Ramayana. Some historians and ancient travellers also support these claims of the Tamils by mentioning about a country called Naga Dipa. However, the Tamils were concentrated in the north, and the Sinhalese in the south of the Island in the ancient period. Over centuries, the Tamil population spread to east as well, and the Sinhalese to northwards also. The Tamils were then divided into Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils. The former were the original inhabitants of the land and the latter were the plantation workers from India who were brought to the Island during the British period.

In ancient times, most of the Tamil population depended on agriculture and trade. The trade was handled by the Muslims. The Sinhalese were mainly cultivators and fishermen, depending on subsistence agriculture. In feudal Sri Lanka, there existed no property ownership. The people had only the right to cultivation, an arrangement that derived from direct grant of the rulers. The feudal system and kingship continued, and by the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese arrived in the Island and conquered the Sinhalese kingdom of Kotte and, by early seventeenth century, they took over Jaffna. The prime motivation of the Portuguese was trade and spreading of Christianity. They used the native administrative machinery for their operations. The farmers were also vested with the duty to collect taxes as well as
cinnamon for trade. However, they did not try to interrupt the local practices and systems. The language Creole, introduced by the Portuguese, facilitated and helped address the communication problems of the colonial apparatus. After the conquest, they started the conversion of the native people to Christianity. But, in Jaffna, Christianity had its presence much before the conquest of the Portuguese. The missionaries from south India already started working among the fishermen of Jaffna and Mannar and a large number of the natives were already converted. In fact, the Portuguese had managed to get support from these native minorities, during and after the conquest. This, in turn, increased their domination and, conversely, the Portuguese got a comfortable trading pattern with India, by getting control over Jaffna. Thus, the people of Jaffna got a privileged position from the Portuguese through preferential treatment under laws and exemption in tax.

The Dutch ousted the Portuguese in the middle of the seventeenth century. They setup courts and laws as per the customary laws of the natives of Jaffna, and avoided the Sinhalese, and kept other systems unaltered, like what Portuguese did. Thus, the rule of law was established for the first time in the island based on the Roman-Dutch laws. They continued the Portuguese policy of attaching a school with the church to strengthen the conversion process. They sent the talented students for higher education, even abroad, at the state expense. This obviously became an advantage to the English educated northern people.

The British conquered a portion of Sri Lanka by the middle of the eighteenth century and the entire island came under the control, after some years, by the fall of Kandyan kingdom. In 1802, Sri Lanka became a Crown colony and it was brought under the control of the imperial government in London. The Crown rule transformed the existing feudal village-based economic system of the Island into a
structure of property ownership, wage labour and legal rules. This British controlled economic system was gradually adopted into the Sri Lankan society while continuing its linkage to the European economy and became a part of the ‘colony capitalism.’ The Crown rule showed its characteristics by imposing new laws on the native population, taking ownership of the land and importing of labour to work in plantations. The colonial apparatus claimed that these structures were for the benefit of the natives. However, it worked for the profitability, market mechanism, use of labour and a total exploitation of the colony.

The British also concentrated on the extraction of cinnamon. They levied an export tax on every cinnamon leaving Sri Lanka to monopolise the cinnamon trade. Initially the spice trade was more profitable and, naturally, paddy cultivation declined. But the availability, in due course, of the cinnamon from other countries in the world market reduced the price and thereby the profit. This affected the Sri Lankan economy. The food supplies also declined due to the diminished rice production. Meanwhile, the land acquisition rules were changed to attract foreign capital. The inflow of capital also increased with the introduction of coffee as a profitable cash crop.

The exploitation reached its height with the passing of Crown Lands Ordinance and Temple Lands Registration Act. Further, the Waste Land Ordinance made any balance land in the possession of the natives also went to the authority of the Crown, which was subsequently given to the European investors to develop plantation for the benefit of the imperial power. These two ordinances in effect stole the entire land of natives in Sri Lanka for the foreign-owned enterprises to develop plantations. It was during this period that the Tamil youths in South India were attracted by the job opportunities opened up in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka. The labour migration started individually was later supported by the
British. But they did not pay any attention to provide shelter and other amenities for these Tamil plantation labours who continued to be landless even after independence.

As the British colonial rule established itself, it began to keep the ethnic differences of the native population alive. The British also made nominations to councils and committees based on ethnic or communal lines. They also promoted the spreading of Christianity through missionary activities and schools. The English education was provided by these Christian missionary schools. These schools were mostly located in the northern part of Sri Lanka and that gave an advantageous position to Tamils to learn and become proficient in English. A group of Sinhalese also took advantage of the English education. These English educated groups emerged as an elite class who were loyal to the government. This gave an opportunity for the English educated youths, mostly Tamils, to join the British bureaucracy at entry or middle level positions. So the proficiency in English became a means of economic advancement and English education was much valued. The Tamils enjoyed a much better position than the Sinhalese in every aspect of life during the colonial rule. The plantation economy, bureaucratic opportunities and government nominations divided the society much further on economic, ethnic and communal lines. The material conditions in Sri Lanka, on the eve of independence, were thus susceptible to generate ethnic and sectarian feelings.

However, the governments that came to power in Colombo, after the transfer of power in 1948, were apparently not aware of the implications of the long-term effects of the colonial rule. The first UNP government, for example, heightened threat perceptions with its discriminatory programmes and policies. The Indian Tamils, who were a remarkable chunk of the labour class were literally thrown out of the Island by introducing the Citizenship Act in 1948. They were deprived of all rights enjoyed previously and thereby
disfranchised. This made them ‘stateless’ people for quite a long time. Scholars argue that the fear of the government in the solidarity of the Tamil and Sinhalese working class forced them to implement this Act.

The discriminatory law of ‘Sinhala only Act’ put forward in 1956 again put an end to the equal status enjoyed by the Tamils, along with the Sinhalese, in administrative positions. The Tamils, who were not proficient in Sinhala, were deprived of the government jobs, making the Sinhala as the only official language of administration. The SLFP government could appease the racial and religious elements of the Sinhalese group who supported the SLFP to assume power. What followed was the beginning of ethnic tensions and conflicts which led to the Bandaranayake-Chelvanayakam Pact, seeking a solution to the language problem. But the government was forced to abort this due to the pressure from the Sinhalese groups. Meanwhile, the problem of citizenship of the Indian Tamils was kept unsolved for long and it even affected the Indo-Sri Lankan relations. The Sirimavo Bandaranayake and Lal Bahadur Shastri signed a pact in 1964 with a view to addressing the problems of granting citizenship and repatriation. The process of repatriation and rehabilitation started years after that, following another agreement with India in 1974. However, the socio-economic conditions of these people remained dismal in both Sri Lanka and India, even after granting citizenship and repatriation.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan Tamils continued to face policies of discrimination and marginalisation, over years. In the early seventies, the government introduced standardization programme in professional education, which amounted to marginalising the Tamil students. It was a discriminatory, selective device which sought to control the admission of Tamil students in professional courses. This was accompanied by the policy of abolition of English medium schools. This tended to halt the progress of the Tamil
students further and thereby would help the Sinhalese who were very poor in English.

Discrimination was every evident in the spatial distribution and colonisation policy of successive governments from 1950s. The governments purposefully made Sinhalese settlements in traditional Tamil homelands in order to change the demographic structure. New constituencies with Sinhalese domination were developed within the Tamil dominated areas. Besides, most of the catchment areas of the major irrigation projects were allotted to Sinhalese settlers. Because of the better irrigation system and new fertile lands, the paddy production was also very high and the Sinhalese settlers could earn more. Besides, most of the developmental projects were concentrated in other parts of the country, ignoring northern and eastern provinces.

The uneven capitalist development in Sri Lanka affected the process of socio-economic development. The shift of the policy regime from import substitution to export promotion and then again back to liberalisation affected those people who continued to depend on trade and commerce. The government gave open political support to Sinhalese capital and discriminated against the Tamil capital in the industrialisation process, and it showed a patently biased attitude towards the Tamils. As trade was controlled by the Tamils, the closing of the economy affected them most. The closed economy had developed public sector concerns through which the Sinhalese would have got more preference. The Tamils, on the other hand, would have more options with the opening up of the economy as it would boost the private sector.

It was in this background that the UNP government appointed a presidential commission in 1977 to enquire the grievances of the Tamils. The Commission recommended District Development Councils aimed at decentralizing administrative powers on a district
basis in a wide range of subjects. But the Tamil youths thought that DDCs were a poor substitute for the concept of Eelam. The DDCs Act, brought forth later, was seen as an “act of deception.” The structure, powers and function of DDCs and their financial policies were framed in such a way that the Centre would have great influence on the units. The three years of actual functioning of DDCs, however, disillusioned even the moderates among the Tamil leaders.

Meanwhile, the passing of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and, subsequently, the Emergency Regulation Act further worsened the situation. Accordingly, it became lawful for any police officer to exercise extraordinary powers to punish innocent civilians. While issues from the past continued to disturb the Tamil psyche, new problems began to crop up which deteriorated the ethnic situation in Sri Lanka. The extra judicial killings and custody deaths were the order of the day in northern and eastern provinces. Many of them were brutally killed and the bodies were burned in public.

The initial reaction of the Tamil political leaders to all the policies of discrimination appeared to be inhibited and ended up with in controlled reactions in parliament. This attitude of the moderate politicians was interpreted to have yielded nothing other than keeping their positions safe. It was during this time that the Tamil politics began to take a new road, by getting radicalised with the intervention of Tamil youths. The worsening political conditions provided a fertile ground for a number of militant Tamil youth organizations like the LTTE, PLOTE, TELO, EROS etc to make inroads into the society by advancing the Tamil question. The ideological base of all these organisations was Marxism-Leninism and the aim was the achievement of a Tamil Eelam – separate homeland. They saw this as ‘national liberation’ struggle. The LTTE believed that its commitment to armed struggle was not an alternative to mass movement. It aimed at the abolition of all forms of exploitation
and establishment of a socialist mode of production ensuring that the means of production and exchange of Eelam becomes the ownership of the Eelam people. It argued that the LTTE was committed to work with the world national liberation movements, socialist states, international working class parties etc. besides fighting against imperialism, neo-colonialism, Zionism, racism and all other forces of subjugation. The child combatants, female fighters and suicide squads carrying cyanide capsules were peculiarities of the LTTE. 40 per cent of its fighting cadres were both males and females between the age of nine and eighteen years. There were LTTE-run schools and training camps for the recruits.

As tensions mounted, with fresh round of ethnic conflicts, the Sinhalese began to see the Tamils as the enemies of their nationalism. Meanwhile, direct negotiations began between the Sri Lankan government and six Tamil groups at the initiative of India. Proposals were put in place for the devolution of powers to the provinces. But this was rejected by the LTTE who declared that “the creation of an indivisible home land” should be the basis of a meaningful settlement. By the beginning of 1987, ethnic tensions and the fighting of militants with the Sri Lankan security forces reached a new height. This was the background of the role of India in the making of peace in Sri Lanka. What followed was an Accord between India and Sri Lanka for the maintenance of peace in the Island. However, there was considerable opposition from the Sinhala community and even within the ruling circles against India’s role in the crisis. An important provision in the Accord was the formation and sending of an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to the Island to restore peace and normalcy. All major militant groups, except the LTTE accepted the Accord and surrendered their arms. When Premadasa became President of Sri Lanka, he sought the immediate withdrawal of Indian troops as he
was a staunch opponent of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord. The IPKF operations, with the innumerable instances of human rights violations, only antagonised and alienated the Tamils. Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination was a turning point in the history of the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka. Prabhakaran became the principal accused in the conspiracy to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi. This caused a setback in India-Sri Lankan relations also.

After Premadasa’s assassination by the LTTE, Chandrika Kumaratunga had come to power. She had taken initiative for direct talks with LTTE. But the approach of LTTE was again not positive, alleging that the government was not sincere on arriving at a peaceful solution. President Chandrika, however, announced a devolution package in 1995 to make the peace process fruitful and give a chance to all to participate in the democratic process. The package included the devolution of powers, stable and pluralistic society, equality before the laws, recognition to Sinhala and Tamil as official languages, the identity of distinct communities etc. The LTTE rejected the package accusing that this plan was an attempt to isolate LTTE from the Tamils. At the same time, the President also announced that if the LTTE would accept the devolution package, the government was prepared to offer ceasefire to the LTTE.

Meanwhile the 9/11 attacks in the Unites States became a great setback to the LTTE as the US government included the LTTE as a dangerous terror outfit among the list of such organisations. This would have compelled the LTTE to take a strategic position on mediation in the crisis. In 2002 the LTTE as well as the Sri Lankan government together agreed for a third party mediation and decided to approach Norway, who was willing to offer its good offices. Accordingly, both the Sri Lankan government and LTTE arrived at a Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) in 2002. There was an immediate impact of the CFA in general, and particularly in the
north and eastern region. Initially, the CFA sought to suspend the war between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE and facilitate the two parties to build confidence. Countrywide, the economy picked up and the prospects improved for key sectors such as tourism. The agreement also enabled the LTTE to expand its de facto state building project and strengthen its grip on the region. In fact, the LTTE had run a real state administration, which included revenue collection, police and judiciary as well as public services and economic development initiatives. This political - territorial division meant that Sri Lanka had a de facto dual state structure, with LTTE also exercising considerable influence on state institutions and officials in the government-controlled parts of the northeast province.

However, the peace process in Sri Lanka, under the mediation of Norway, collapsed because of the uncompromising attitudes of the parties. There were limitations for the Norwegian mediators also because of the ideological conflicts between the President and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka as both of them were from different political parties. In the 2004 parliamentary elections, the People’s Alliance came back to power with the support of nationalist JVP. Several parties supported Mahinda Rajapakse to win the election. The JVP and the Sinhala Buddhist ideology-led JHU strongly opposed the peace talks with the LTTE. As the peace talks were continuing, the Sri Lankan government as well as LTTE also tried their level best to increase the military combat capacity. However, the government forces became more powerful than any time before.

As the Sinhalese hardliners got ground in the ministry and they toughened their attitude against LTTE and its war, a parallel split process was underway in the LTTE cadre. Mahathiya, one of the strong lieutenants of Prabhakaran was arrested and killed. This created frustration and fundamental division among the Tamil
tigers. A division under the leadership of Karuna was also split away from the LTTE and a large number of fighting force was lost for the LTTE. This, in fact, weakened the LTTE in military operations. As the third party mediation also failed, ethnic conflicts erupted again. In retaliation the army also started attacking the LTTE. The ethnic conflict, started as a usual fight, turned into a full-fledged war during 2008-9 and it ended with the killing of LTTE supremo Prabhakaran and his family, besides the leaders and fighters of the organisation. On 19 May 2009 Rajapakse’s government announced that the conflict between the government and the LTTE was brought to an end. The military measures resorted to by the Sri Lankan government since 2008 ended with the LTTE’s military defeat and the killing of almost all of its leadership. However, the humanitarian cost of the war was too high and the government has come under charges of serious war crimes. The UN Panel of Experts appointed by the Secretary General confirmed many of the charges regarding Sri Lankan military’s violations of international humanitarian law concerning the civilian populations.

Sri Lanka is currently facing multiple challenges of reconstruction, rehabilitation, peace building and, most importantly, of implementing political and constitutional reforms that can sustain autonomy to the regions where Tamils are in majority. The lessons from the Sri Lankan experience show that there cannot be any military solution to the fundamental socio-economic problems of any multi-ethnic societies in the post-colonial world. Though the military defeat of the Tamil militants was ensured, at a very high social and humanitarian cost, the nation building challenge of the Sri Lankan state has now become even more complex and problematic insofar as the crucial issues raised by the Tamil organisations remain alive, as it were over decades.