

AN ANATOMY OF THE SRI LANKAN CONFLICT

This paper will compile an analytical narrative of the Sri Lankan conflict. It will lay out stages, events and turning points. It will track changing theaters of the conflict. It will identify the changing cast of characters involved. The paper neither undertakes a historical analysis of causes, nor a detailed description of consequences, concentrating instead on a reconstruction of the script and dramatis personae.

I. Organizing ‘Conflict’ into a Narrative

Conflict resolution is predicated on understanding the conflict in question. What is at the root of the conflict? What are the additional complications that have arisen in the course of the conflict? What is the history of previous attempts at resolution? What are the points and sources of rupture between the parties to the conflict, and what might be the bases of reconciliation? Without a thorough dissection of the conflict, our attempts to resolve it are at best superficial. ‘Anatomy’ is defined as ‘an analysis or minute examination’ by the Random House dictionary. In the context of this paper, that involves the provision of a framework for the paper’s narrative section that casts light on actors, events, causes and consequences even though the paper does not propose to argue causation or examine impact in detail.

One can either regard the ‘Sri Lankan Conflict’ as one conflict or multiple conflicts, in terms of time and in terms of dyads of actors. Describing it as one conflict facilitates the creation of a cogent story, and describing it as many conflicts allows us to create a larger dataset with which to compare measures of conflict resolution and reconciliation. While the central conflict is that between organizations representing Sri Lankan Tamils from the northern and eastern areas on the one hand and the Sri Lankan government on the other, over the decades, it has also on occasion spawned conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils in different parts of the island, between Sinhalese organizations and the Sri Lankan government, and most recently, some will to mobilize on the part of Sri Lankan Muslims. Moreover, the Tamil narrative of the conflict sometimes subsumes the political struggles of the Estate Tamils or Indian Tamils and sometimes leaves them out.

The importance of examining alternative modes of narration is to underscore the complexity of the phenomenon to be narrated. A ‘flat’ narrative that does not take cognizance of the consequences of one organizational choice or the other lends itself to easy manipulation.

A. One conflict, variously organized

Narrating the story of one single Sri Lankan conflict, one might organize that conflict in several different ways, using as markers: (1) levels of violence; (2) territoriality; (3) location; (4) actors; (5) voices and stories in the conflict discourse; (6) attempts at resolution.

1. Using levels of violence as a marker

Time, technology and the impress of events all alter a conflict irrevocably. Arguably however, it is a ratcheting up of violence that makes it intractable. Lives lost, the expenses of war, the costs of collateral damage and the secondary consequences of violent conflict (easy availability of weapons, displacement, the frequent linkage of arms and drug trades, etc.) all raise the stakes for both sides, and negotiation becomes correspondingly difficult. Thus, organizing a conflict narrative in terms of levels of violence allows us an assessment of opportunities (lost and optimized, both) for resolution.

The escalation of violence in the Sri Lankan conflict allows us to divide it into three phases. The first phase may be termed the *parliamentary phase*, when divisions first appeared within the Colombo elite to whom the British were to transfer power. The issues in this phase pertained primarily to representation in government (legislature and executive). The disenfranchisement of Estate Tamils may be included in this phase, which I would say ended around 1955. The second is the *phase of riots and skirmishes*, starting from the Sinhala Only riots in 1958 to the Colombo riots in 1983. The passage of the Eelam resolution in 1977 also coincides with a period when Tamil militancy was gathering strength.

The final phase is that of *civil war*. In addition to random attacks and skirmishes, the 1983-2002 phase has been marked by pitched battles on land and sea, and air-raids by the Sri Lankan Air Force. It has also been marked by the growing incidence of bomb blasts and suicide bombings. Finally, it includes a period in which a foreign army got involved in the conflict. This phase in fact may be divided into several parts: 1983-87, when the conflict escalated dramatically into war; 1987-90, the IPKF phase; 1990-1995, when fighting continued between the Tamil militants and the state; 1995-2001, a period of parallel war and attempted constitutional reform and possibly 2002-onwards, we hope negotiations for peace.

2. Using territoriality as a marker

The emergence of a territorialized sense of identity and territorial demands can be a point of no return in the escalation of conflict. Because land is less mutable than other definitions of identity,

it is harder to turn back the clock once a community decides that this or that is its ancestral base or 'traditional homeland.' Identity definitions, land-based demands and land-based dispensations are all slower to change than non-territorial definitions, demands and dispensations. When you consider land one dimension/currency of an identity-based struggle, it makes sense to organize the conflict into pre-territorial, territorial and post-territorial phases. Entry into the territorial phase is marked at one level when a group starts identifying also in terms of a particular geographical space and at another, when demands are made or solutions sought in territorial terms (enclaves or federalism, for instance).¹

In the Sri Lankan case, the search for a federal solution to representation debates in the pre-independence period marks the entry into the territorial phase. The creation of the unitary state by the British was intended to break the power of the Kandyan aristocracy and it was the Kandyans among the Ceylonese elite that raised the banner of federalism in 1927 in order to secure autonomy for Kandy.² The Tamil leadership picked up on it in time, founding the Federal Party whose Tamil name was 'Tamizh Arasu Katchi' (Tamil State Party). Although the demand for Tamil independence came decades later, territorial solutions were always on the table from this point onwards.

3. *Using location as a marker*

We tend to think of a conflict (which is in fact a set of conflicts) as being waged always in the same location or theater, and also as being waged all over the place. I mean, if we are talking about Sri Lanka or Bosnia or Sudan, we have one battlefield that is always the venue for action in our heads, based on some map, some image we have seen. At the same time, we tend to say, 'Oh, is it safe in Northern Ireland? Isn't there a war waging there?' Conflicts, like the people who wage them, tend to wander across the terrain. In long-evolving conflicts like that in Sri Lanka, the action—or the bulk of it—tends to move from one area to another.

In the Sri Lankan case, the conflict began as bargaining between elites in Colombo. The post-1955 communal riots took place in places where there were large Sinhalese and Tamil populations coexisting. In the post-1977 period, the bulk of the fighting has remained in the northeastern reaches of the island although the LTTE's suicide bombers and other terrorist operations have taken them well beyond that area, certainly across the Palk Straits. Insofar as the

¹ Swarna Rajagopalan, *State and Nation in South Asia*, Lynne Rienner, 2001, pp. 73-77; also see, Swarna Rajagopalan, "Internal Unit Demarcation and National Identity," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Volume 5:3-4, Fall and Winter 1999, pp.191-211.

² C.R. de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History*, Vikas, Delhi, 1994, pp. 191.

merger of the north and east remains contentious, it is likely that in the aftermath of any attempts at resolution, some hostilities will continue in a localized fashion—perhaps in the border zones of the north and eastern provinces, perhaps as individual acts of violence.

4. *Using actors as a marker*

Like location, the dramatis personae of a conflict too change. In a conflict that lasts generations, individual come and go of course, but if you look also at the class, caste and age composition of those most actively engaged, that too changes over time. These changes sometimes account for changes in the demands raised and methods used in the course of the violence. In a conflict between groups and a state, while some aspects of the state's position might remain relatively constant (the laws that constrain it, its continuing monopoly over legitimate violence, etc.), as the class, caste, age, gender and ethnicity of those who come into power and those who work in government agencies change, so does the propensity of the state to act in one or another fashion.

Sri Lanka's conflict is no exception. In the pre-colonial period communal lines were fluid and there was considerable mobility—around the island as well as between the island and the subcontinent. However, it is common for people to recount the political history of the island as if the north was always a Tamil kingdom and the rest of the island Sinhalese. From all scholarly accounts, what one is able to surmise is that in the colonial period, as a consequence of administrative arrangements and colonial discourse, this overlap between region and language seems to have been frozen as truth. However, working in the colonial administration and with the growth and development of Colombo as a modern trade center, more and more Tamils migrated to 'non-Tamil' areas of the island. A new urban elite arose, whose members came from all groups but interacted and intermarried without restrictions. The English language and engagement with the colonial enterprise greatly facilitated this interaction, but this meant too that large sections of the island's population outside these categories did not share this experience of mutual integration, and unfortunately, given the patterns of European colonization on the island, this residual group included most of the 'Sinhalese' areas. Finally, colonialism introduced a new wave of Tamil migrants to the island—those who were brought in to work on plantations in the central highlands.

The first political contests between the Sinhalese and Tamils were fought between members of the Colombo-based Ceylonese elite. However, with the founding of parties, the stage was set for political mobilization along communal lines. Social activists like Anagarika

Dharmapala and Arumuga Navalar had partly laid the ground for such mobilization at the turn of the previous century. While the elite still was able to arrive at mutual accommodations, by the mid-1950s, majoritarian populism caught on as illustrated by the ‘Sinhala Only’ movement. With the engagement at this point of members of the Buddhist Sangha, the identification of particular political positions with the interests of ‘Sinhala Buddhism’ became complete. Meanwhile, the composition of those who now work for the government has also changed. With five decades of universal free education, government service is no longer the monopoly of missionary-educated, English-speaking urban middle-class society. With the persistence of conflict in Sri Lanka, every section of society has become involved and mobilized either in the main conflict between the state and the Tamil militants, or in the various ancillary conflicts waged in response to it. With the recruitment of women and children, even the usual barriers that exclude them from violent agency have been broken. Thus, we can also narrate this conflict in terms of its elite and mass phases.

On the Tamil side, the sidelining of the mainstream Tamil parties and the elimination of militant groups that might rival the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam counter this expanding mobilization. Therefore, the question of who does, can and should represent the Tamil people in any negotiations has been moot.

5. Using voices and stories as a marker

One of the common denominators in conflict situations is that parties to the conflict have different perceptions of the nature, causes and histories of their situations. These different perceptions of the past and present yield concomitant variations in their visions for the future. Thus

Conducting interviews in Colombo and Kandy in 1996, I asked respondents to tell me the story of their country.³ This question was intended as a way for me to learn what constituted landmarks and turning points for Sri Lankan opinion-makers from both communities. What emerged were three different stories altogether: (a) the first, I call the ‘Sri Lankan story’ narrated most often by liberal, secular, moderate respondents; (b) the second, I call the ‘Mahavamsa’ story, and it found favor with Sinhalese with a strong sense of grievance; (c) the third is the Tamil version, and it is constructed around specific acts of the post-colonial state and is narrated

³ I have summarized these stories as I heard them in Swarna Rajagopalan, “A Traveller’s Collection of Tales,” *Nethra*, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 12-34.

in contradistinction to the *Mahavamsa* story upon which school texts are based.⁴ Apart from plot differences and toggling hero-villain roles, the language of these stories was also different. A simple illustration is in the three different ways the conflict under discussion was described: ethnic conflict, ethnic problem or self-determination struggle. As one listens and then reconstructs these stories, it is clear that there are three conflicts being described, and the first step towards resolution and reconciliation might well be to bring the stories together.

6. *Using attempts at resolution*

Conflict does not wage for decades without efforts at resolution and the Sri Lankan conflict is not an exception. Since the early years, there have been several attempts to resolve disagreements within the elite and then between all the possible dyads in question.

Attempts at resolution fall along two continua: (1) from coercion to consensus, and (2) from unilateralism to negotiation. There are questions that one can pose by identifying instances along these two continua, even possibly plotting them graphically along two axes. First, does one actor act more unilaterally than another/others? Second, is it possible to predict under what circumstances, unilateral action is initiated? Third, what sorts of action are undertaken unilaterally and what is the range of responses they receive? Fourth, who takes the initiative to organize negotiations, whose initiative yields fruit most often and how many times do the negotiations reach a settlement? Fifth, how many times is the settlement violated and who is the first to violate the settlement (whether a ceasefire or a pact)? Sixth, are there patterns and lessons that we have overlooked for future attempts at resolution?

In the Sri Lankan case, along the first continuum, lie war and terror at one end and the many all-party conferences and the various rounds of talks with Tamil groups on the other. The second continuum has incidents like the Central Bank bomb blast of 1996 and also unilateral ceasefire declarations at one end and the various conferences and talks on the other.

B. As a series of conflicts

Within the rubric of 'the Sri Lankan conflict' nestle several conflicts. You could distinguish relatively discrete phases in the process (parliamentary, civil war) as distinct conflicts since they also engaged different actors, with different methods and different locales. Or, you could

⁴ Valentine Daniel speaks of multiple dispositions, orientations and consciousness, of heritage and history. See E. Valentine Daniel, "Three Dispositions Towards the Past: One Sinhala, Two Tamil," SSC pamphlet no. 2, 1992 and "Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence," Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, pp. 43-47.

distinguish more simply as we will in this section, by identifying each conflict by the parties it engages. Such categorization yields the following list:

1. Sri Lankan Tamils vs. the Sri Lankan state
2. Sri Lankan Tamils vs. Sinhalese
3. Sri Lankan Tamils vs. Moors
4. IPKF vs. LTTE, that became IPKF vs. LTTE aided by the Sri Lankan state.

In this list, the first conflict is what this paper identifies as central. The second is a key input into the first, with direct consequences for it. One phase of this conflict (the JVP campaign of 1987-89) was a response to the fourth conflict. The third is a by-product of the first. The fourth follows from the long-term engagement of one outside actor in the conflict, and it spawned a brief alliance between the main parties to the first conflict on the list. It is an interesting example of shifting alliances between external, 'national' and sub-state forces.

1. Tamils vs. the Sri Lankan state

By my reading, the central conflict in Sri Lanka is that between Tamils and the Sri Lankan state. Let me first address the 'buts' that follow:

- a. But not all Tamils are engaged in this conflict
- b. But the conflict is also represented as a Tamil-Sinhalese conflict

Tamils in Sri Lanka may be divided into two main categories, which are commonly referred to as 'Sri Lankan Tamils' and 'Indian' or 'Estate' Tamils. The first category refers to those Tamils whose ancestors migrated over the centuries from the mainland to Sri Lanka. The second category refers to those Tamils whose ancestors were brought over by the British during the colonial period to work on the tea plantations that they developed in the central highlands. The political interests of the two communities are different, with the latter occupying a much more tenuous position as stateless laborers after the enactment of 1948's citizenship laws. For the most part, the Sri Lankan Tamil leadership has not concerned itself with the everyday issues that affect estate workers. In return, as the Sri Lankan Tamil leadership has violently espoused secession, the leadership of the Indian Tamils has found it profitable to work with one or the other of the mainstream political parties rather than throw in its lot with the new militant politics of the other Tamil community.

In the early, parliamentary phase of the conflict, its polemics and politics was that of the Western-educated elite in either community. In the post-1970s phase, the various militant groups first marginalized the moderate Tamil parties, and then with a seeming-inevitability, one among

them, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ensured its own monopoly over the leadership of the Tamil community by orchestrating assassinations and assaults against its political and militant rivals. In neither phase, therefore, can we accurately assume a Tamil leadership that came from and spoke for all Tamils, even all Sri Lankan Tamils. Today, although the LTTE is treated as the appropriate Tamil interlocutor in negotiations with the government, it must not be forgotten that its claims have been buttressed by fratricide and opposition to it is muted both by fear of its reprisals and alienation from the state. However, while it is true that not every Sri Lankan Tamil supports the conflict with the government, the demand for secession, or the tactics of the LTTE, the sense of grievance finds resonance with most Sri Lankan Tamils, regardless of class and location.

The contention that this is a Tamil-Sinhalese conflict is a misrepresentation in my view. While any two communities living cheek by jowl have their differences, the most insidious disputes between these communities arose in the context of laying down rules of the game for the soon-to-be-independent state of Ceylon and the most provocative initiatives were those made by the government of that state. Thus, the primary action-reaction dialectic is a pattern of government initiative—minority leadership response. Every Tamil demand has one referent—the state of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. Equal representation, language rights, federalism and independence are all demands posed in terms of the state. Insofar as Tamils express grievances against the Sinhalese, these demands have to do with the reinforcement of their numerical preponderance by majoritarian government, and with the apparent willingness of government after government to accommodate the majority. Sinhalese political mobilization has been directed ‘against Tamils’ but as a response to the conflict between them and the state. This will be discussed further in the next section.

The escalation of conflict between the Tamils and the Sri Lankan state is marked by an escalation of both Tamil demands and the use of violence on either side, although the two escalated at different rates. From equal representation based on a non-numerical view of inter-nation relations on the island, to self-determination that was seen as best actualized through an independent state, the escalation of demands has been steady and linear. Violence entered the conflict only about two decades after the first divergences over ‘fifty-fifty’ representation, and then as riots rather than civil war or terrorism. Although for two decades after independence, the government reneged on every pact it signed with the Tamil leadership under pressure from vocal lobbies representing the interests of the majority community, militancy among Tamils did not arise until the 1970s. The 1977 demand by Tamils for a separate state was of course, the ultimate

demand a group could make when the state is its referent. A group's alienation from the state culminates in the demand for secession. Since the mid-1970s has been no coming back of violence and even ceasefire periods have in fact been periods merely of the reduction of violence, rather than its cessation. The negotiations thus, still center on issues that are decades-old, but technological change, generational change, and globalization have utterly altered the nature of the conflict between the Tamils and the Sri Lankan state.

2. *Tamils vs. Sinhalese*

As stated in the previous section, it is a misrepresentation to regard this as a Tamil-Sinhalese conflict, and let me add, less still as a Hindu-Buddhist one. Any mutual hostility between members of these two communities originates neither in the linguistic or perceived 'racial' differences between them nor in the doctrinal differences between Hinduism and Buddhism, but in political differences over access, power, rights and opportunities. In fact on the ground, Tamil and Sinhala as spoken in Sri Lanka share some vocabulary; to the outside eye, Tamils and Sinhalese look alike; and in everyday practice, Hindu deities grace Buddhist temples. This is something that was pointed out to me by some of the most vocal interlocutors of the Sinhalese community's 'interests'.

It would not be inaccurate to say that in fact, there are two strands to the polemic of these interlocutors. The first strand is a petition for the redressal of wrongs done to the community in colonial times. This petition is directed at the state and insofar as these wrongs are described in terms of comparisons to the perceived Tamil advantages, it is directed against Tamils. The second strand stems from outrage; Tamils who enjoyed advantages in the colonial period, according to this view, could not possibly be making more demands upon a state that, by democratic right, should be defined in the image of the majority community!

In what I have characterized as the '*Mahavamsa*' rendition of the Sri Lankan conflict, the Sinhalese community is the hapless victim of colonial forces that serve to favor the Tamils, allowing them to gain a dominant position in the administrative and educational institutions set up at the time. The 'fifty-fifty' controversy provided evidence of the Tamil intention to rob the Sinhalese of their rightful position on the island. In response to this, first Sinhalese members of the elite who formed the first few governments of independent Ceylon's government, and then, other segments of the Sinhalese community acted to protect and enhance their political position. With the introduction of violence into the dialogue between the Tamils and the Sri Lankan state, grief over individual losses and the collective loss of a national vision compounded resentment

on two counts. From this perspective, the Sri Lankan state is rightfully a Sinhala Buddhist state, reflecting the identity of the majority. Therefore, attacks on the state are attacks on the community. Being placed under attack when in fact you are the aggrieved party naturally enrages adherents of this position. Further, even as the militants' continuing atrocities draw condemnation, they also focus attention upon Tamil alienation, which in this view, is baseless and unnecessary. Tamils did so well and gained so many advantages in the early modern period that everything that follows is more like affirmative action than ethnic discrimination. That the world should focus attention upon violent ingrates is a second source of anger among these sections of the Sinhalese community.

An extreme version of this perspective was that of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna in the late 1980s.⁵ Taking some cues from the newly emerging Jathika Chintanaya ideology of members of the new Sinhala-educated elite, whose capacity to wield political influence was limited relative to their socio-economic status, the JVP shared an egalitarian ethic (albeit from quite different ideational roots) with the Jathika Chintanaya school. Social change depended on the mobilization of rural youth from the majority (Sinhala Buddhist) community, and from this point to its Sinhala Buddhist extremism was a small step. Further, the JVP, in contrast to the thinking of some members of the Jathika Chintanaya school, was vehemently anti-India. In the post-1987 period, when the Indian Peace-keeping Force was fighting in the northern reaches of the island while Sri Lankan troops were confined to the barracks, the time was right to accuse the government of first, ceding ground on Sri Lankan sovereignty and second, being lenient towards the LTTE. The penetration by the JVP of every Sri Lankan institution was profound at this stage. The JVP death squads wreaked havoc for two years before a swift and brutal government crackdown caused the organization to collapse in 1989. In its current incarnation, the JVP is a mainstream political party, along with the Sinhala Urumaya party that purports to speak to issues of discrimination against the majority.⁶

⁵ The Janata Vimukti Peramuna had its first incarnation as a Marxist youth insurrection in 1971. The movement went through a phase when it operated as a political party between 1977-83. It was banned in 1983 for allegedly being involved in the anti-Tamil riots. In this period there was a shift in its orientation, acquiring a rightist, anti-Tamil stance and a weapons stockpile. For an exhaustive account of the events of this period, see C.A. Chandraprema, *Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror*, Lake House, Colombo, 1992.

⁶ The Sinhala Urumaya party was launched in April 2000. According to a website dedicated to this party, their objectives are as follows: (a) To safeguard the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unitary state of Sri Lanka; (b) Abolition of provincial councils; (c) To safeguard the equality among all the ethnic, religious and any other cultural groups; (d) To reclaim the lost rights of Sinhalese; (e) To strengthen the national economy, poverty alleviation, and to safeguard the natural resources and environment of Sri Lanka; (f) To safeguard the religious, cultural and moral values of the nation; (g) To eradicate terrorism, racism and separatism; (h) To preserve and strengthen the democratic institution. See http://www.spur.asn.au/Sihala_Urumaya.htm, accessed June 9, 2002.

In 1996, a National Joint Committee of several Sinhalese organizations appointed a commission to inquire into the status of the majority community from the point of view of the proposed constitutional reforms. In 1997, they published an interim report, which held that the devolution package, which was at the core of the proposed reform, could only impoverish and endanger the majority community further. The final report was released in 1999. Notwithstanding such assertive action, polling conducted over several months in 2001-02 shows that there is a growing sentiment in favour of the peace process.⁷

3. Tamils vs. Moors

Muslims in Sri Lanka come from two communities: the Moors who are descended from Arabs who have lived along Sri Lanka's coast from ancient times, and the Malays. According to the last two censuses, Sri Lankan Muslims, or Moors as they are known, make up approximately 7-8% of the population. According to the 1981 census, they are concentrated in Ampara, Colombo, Kandy, Batticaloa, Kurunegala, Trincomalee and Kalutara.

Political differences between the Tamils and Moors stem from two sources. First, the Moors speak Tamil but resist the Sri Lankan Tamil attempt to co-opt them as Tamils. Because of their Arab lineage, they do not consider themselves ethnically Tamils.⁸ Moreover, in Batticaloa and especially Trincomalee, they are an important part of the districts' ethnic pluralities and the demand for a separate Tamil state with a merged North and East and Trincomalee as its capital would make them a disadvantaged minority within that set-up.

These differences have manifested themselves in several ways. In 1980, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was founded to give Muslims, mainly from the east, a voice in national politics. Zarin Ahmed writes that there were three phases in their politics. An early passive one in which they focused primarily on business issues, an assertive one from the 1980s to mid-1990s when there was talk of jihad forces to counter the LTTE and the present phase in which for the most part they have been working with the political mainstream.⁹

The Moor presence in the East was significant enough to undermine exclusive Tamil claims to the region. It would also undermine Tamil control over the administration. Therefore,

⁷ See the Centre for Policy Alternatives' Peace Confidence Index at <http://www.cpalanka.org/polling.html>. They have conducted six waves of public opinion surveys on levels of support and understandings of the conflict and peace process.

⁸ Uvais Ahmed, Sri Lanka Ethnic Crisis: A Muslim Perspective, in Kumar Rupesinghe, ed., *Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka*, International Alert, London, 1998, pp. 290-91.

⁹ Zarin Ahmad, Muslims: Third Political Force? <http://www.ipcs.org/issues/articles/438-sl-zarin.html>, accessed June 8, 2002.

since the outbreak of civil war in 1983, the LTTE has expelled around 100,000 Muslims from their ancestral homes and lands in Jaffna, Mannar and Vanni on short notice. This has not only created a large class of displaced, dispossessed families, but also altered the demographics of places like Puttalam to which they have moved. Such change has caused concern among sections of the Sinhala Buddhist community and makes the Moors doubly vulnerable. In the circumstances, Moor anxiety about the terms of the resolution of the conflict becomes quite understandable. In the words of a Muslim quoted in a human rights report: “With all its drawbacks we can survive in the present situation, if needs be, on kanji (rice porridge). But if the government and the LTTE start talking, we are finished! Our experience of the LTTE’s intentions is that they would either finish us off or chase us away.”¹⁰

The SLMC was a supported of the PA and its devolution package, but broke ranks with it in 2001. In the post-ceasefire scenario, the Moors have demanded a role in the negotiations whose outcome affects them as much as anyone else. In response to that, the LTTE’s chief spokesman was quoted on the Eelamist website, TamilNet, as saying, “Tamil Eelam (nation) is also the homeland of the Muslims and we have to live in harmony.” Balasingham is also reported to have said that the LTTE recognizes the “unique cultural identity” of the Muslims.¹¹ Ten days after this report, the SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem and LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran met and agreed that the SLMC would participate in the Thailand talks, and that they would discuss power-sharing in the interim administration of the north-east and the return of displaced Muslims to their homes. The agreement implied mutual recognition—of de facto LTTE control of the north-east and SLMC leadership of the Muslims of the area.¹² The burying of this hatchet promises a period of cooperation between the two groups, but whether that will be realized remains to be seen. Further, it is highly unlikely that there will not be tussles between the two parties as (a) challengers to their respective claims arise with the restoration of some democratic process in the area—as they will; and (b) the push and pull of actual allocation of portfolios, functions and offices begins as well as the day-to-day administration.

4. India in Sri Lanka

¹⁰ University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), “The Debasement of Law and of Humanity and the Drift Towards Total War,” Report 8. 28th August 1991. <http://www.uthr.org/Reports/Report8/chapter4.htm>, accessed June 8, 2002.

¹¹ Scott McDonald (Reuters), “Tamil Tigers apologise to Sri Lanka’s Muslims,” *Hindustan Times*, April 5, 2002. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/nonfram/050402/dLFOR73.asp>, accessed June 8, 2002.

¹² Nirupama Subramanian, “Muslims strike deal with LTTE,” *The Hindu*, April 15, 2002. <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2002/04/05/stories/2002041502531200.htm>, accessed May 31, 2002.

India's engagement with its neighbors is a subject of innumerable books and articles¹³, and its involvement in Sri Lanka's affairs has also been written about extensively, authoritatively and by some of those most involved.¹⁴

India sits at the center of South Asia, inevitably affected by events on its long borders. When events within its neighbors' borders spill over, they spill over into India. It is more than a cliché therefore, that the well-being of its neighbors is critical to India's well-being. From the international relations point of view, a corollary of this location is that India views itself as the regional power and considers management of conflicts in the region its prerogative. Finally, there is what Sri Lankan scholars call the 'Tamil Nadu factor'—the fact that a short distance away from Sri Lanka live millions of Tamil-speakers, whose eponymous state is an important player in Indian federal politics and several of whom have been important members of India's policy community. The pressure exerted by Tamil Nadu politicians in response to what they see as the plight of their ethnic kin.

Disturbances in Sri Lanka, particularly those that affected the Tamils adversely, have always aroused a clamour in India for intervention. However, the resistance to wanton intervention persisted until Indira Gandhi's second tenure. In this phase (the early 1980s) the Dravidian parties of Tamil Nadu were mutually competitive in their expression of support for the Sri Lankan Tamil cause, and this moral support had come to take the form of safe havens and training camps for the militants.¹⁵ This response acquired the support of the central government and its defence and intelligence agencies, and India's backing of the militancy was an open secret. After the 1983 riots, when thousands of Tamil refugees fled to India, the pressure to intervene mounted. In June 1987, the Indian Air Force dropped food and medical supplies over Jaffna Peninsula, which had been blockaded by Sri Lankan forces. In July 1987, the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord was signed whereby a measure of political reform was initiated, and it was

¹³ For instance, Imtiaz Ahmed and Abdur Rob Khan, *India's policy fundamentals, neighbours, and post-Indira developments*, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka, 1985; Ashok Kapur with A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Foreign policy of India and her neighbours*, Macmillan Press, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & St. Martin's Press, New York, 1996; Padmaja Murthy, *Managing suspicions: understanding India's relations with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka*, Knowledge World in association with Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, 2000.

¹⁴ For instance: John Gooneratne, *A Decade of Confrontation: Sri Lanka and India in the 1980s*, Stamford Lake, Pannipitiya, 2000; SD Muni, *Pangs of Proximity: India and Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis*, Sage, New Delhi, 1993; Rajat Ganguly, *Kim State Intervention in Ethnic Conflicts: Lessons from South Asia*. Sage, New Delhi, 1998; Rohan Gunaratne, *Indian intervention in Sri Lanka: the role of India's intelligence agencies*, South Asian Network on Conflict Research, Colombo, 1993; J.N. Dixit, *Assignment Colombo*, Konark, Delhi, 1998.

¹⁵ John Gooneratne (2000, page 77) cites Shekar Gupta, "Sri Lanka Rebels: Ominous presence in Tamil Nadu," *India Today*, March 31, 1984, pp. 88-94. Also see Rohan Gunaratne's work.

agreed that an Indian Peace-Keeping Force would oversee the disarmament and demobilization of Tamil militant groups, while the Sri Lankan armed forces would disengage from the conflict. The LTTE was the only group that did not lay down arms at this point, and in a bizarre twist, as the IPKF and LTTE fought a bloody battle on Sri Lankan soil, the Premadasa covertly supported the Tigers in their war effort. The IPKF was withdrawn in 1990.

Simultaneously, the presence of the Sri Lankan Tamil militants and the refugee camps contributed the erosion of popular support for the Eelamists. First, the law and order situation in Tamil Nadu deteriorated rapidly as the internecine conflict among the militants came to be played out in the streets of its cities. Second, the IPKF ended up fighting an LTTE that was being covertly supported by the Sri Lankan government which was under pressure to have the IPKF leave. The violence spilled over into India as the bomb blast at Meenambakkam airport in Madras in 1984 showed. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi was the last straw. Since then, Indian support for the militants has ceased, and Indian intervention in Sri Lankan affairs has been limited to patrolling neighbouring waters and keeping a watching brief on events in the island. In Tamil Nadu, there is a resurgent interest in supporting the struggle for Eelam that seems to reflect local political maneuvering rather than abiding ethnic kinship or ideological affinity.

II. Conflict in Sri Lanka

In this section, taking into account the previous discussion, I will attempt to reconstruct a coherent story of the Sri Lankan conflict that takes into account all these multiple ways in which it can be told. Thus, it will front-stage the Tamil conflict with the Sri Lankan state, and highlight phases in that dyadic interaction, while signaling other conflicts and their moments of conflagration as well as their intersections with this one. The Tamil-Sri Lankan state conflict will be narrated in a somewhat dialectical fashion, streamlining its own inherent messiness into an action/initiative-response pattern.

Laying the foundations of an independent Ceylon, c. 1912-1948

The constitutional development of most post-colonial states can usually be traced to last stages of the colonial period, when a modicum of representation or devolution is first introduced and when debates over first-order questions are first articulated. In Sri Lanka, this process is usually traced back to around 1912, when a series of reforms, significant enough to warrant the adjective 'constitutional,' were initiated. The twin issues of representation and enfranchisement had non-territorial and territorial dimensions.

In 1912, elections were introduced into Ceylon politics for the first time with two consequences: one, it divided the elite who were both electorate and candidates at this point, and two, because they introduced separate electorates, communal and territorial dimensions (which overlapped in some instances) entered the scene. For the British, it was not the Sinhala-Tamil equation that was most crucial as that between Low-country and Kandyan Sinhalese. It was the power of the latter that the unitary state and communal representation were both designed to limit. Accordingly, Kandyans took the lead initially in the jostling to re-adjust the quotas provided by the colonial dispensation—indeed making the first demand for a federal Ceylon. Manipulation by the British Governor of Ceylon exploited existing differences within the elite so that the two Sinhalese groups competed with each other, and gradually the Tamil elite came to view the Sinhalese as a group as rivals.¹⁶ Differences with Sinhalese leaders over what would historically become insignificant matters, led to a key Tamil leader (Ponnambalam Arunachalam) breaking with the Ceylon National Congress in 1918.

Mahajana Sabhas had been founded around this time whose meetings were in Sinhala and whose goal was to get Buddhist candidates elected.¹⁷ The Tamil Mahajana Sabai was formed in 1921.

The 1924 constitution set up a 1:2 proportion for the distribution of seats between the Tamils and Sinhalese. When consultations began with the Donoughmore Commissioners, Tamils held fast to the need to maintain this distribution. One of the main objections of the Sinhalese leadership was to the extension of franchise to Indians resident in Sri Lanka, and because the Ceylonese elite was so conservative (across the ethnic board) on the question of popular enfranchisement, this was in fact a unifying issue in this period. While the latter question was resolved in the Donoughmore Constitution (1931) through special requirements that Indians had to meet, the former issue was not. The Tamil-Sinhalese proportion in the legislature was reduced to 1:5. The Jaffna Youth League organized a boycott of the 1931 elections (which was only partially successful), and it was viewed as a protest against this reduced Tamil representation. Subsequent elections threw up leaders whose orientation was to promote Tamil interests.

The ruptures between the Tamil and Sinhalese leadership continued to grow. As Tamils lobbied for greater representation and access, the Sinhalese responded by political maneuvers that yielded an all-Sinhalese cabinet. Outraged, G.G. Ponnambalam who was one of the new

¹⁶ C.R. de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History*, Vikas, 1987, pp. 188.

¹⁷ C.R. de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History*, Vikas, 1987, pp. 189.

leaders thrown up the Jaffna protests, ratcheted the representation demand from 1:2 to “fifty-fifty” in 1938. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike had founded the Sinhala Maha Sabha in 1937. Although D.S. Senanayake led an attempt in the 1940s to unify the elite towards securing independence, communal relations among the elite continued to decline.

The 1946 Soulbury Constitution accommodated minority fears in two ways. First, representation would now be partly territorially and demographically defined. This allowed greater representation to both Tamils and Kandyans—the two most restive minorities until this point. Second, Section 29 (2) explicitly prohibited discrimination on grounds of religion or community. This would pass for a bill of rights in Ceylonese politics until 1972.¹⁸ Ceylon won its independence in 1948.

All told, the decades between 1912-1948 witnessed an unraveling of what integration colonialism had forged among the Colombo-based elite in Sri Lanka. What they agreed on was a restriction of power to their class, cooperating to limit suffrage and to deprive Indians resident in Ceylon of voting rights. However, that was more or less meaningless because they could not agree on how they should share power. The consequence was that with each successive limitation placed on their representation and access to power, the Tamil leaders ratcheted up their claims from keeping the 1:2 ratio to “fifty-fifty,” and as they did so, the Sinhalese leaders responded by trying to further restrict their access.

We have framed this as a conflict between the state and the Sri Lankan Tamils. However, in this phase, the competition was primarily between sections of the elite, with the state acting as both agent provocateur (local officials) and also arbitrator (those sent from London). The competition is also for the spoils of state power, and its legacy continued into the next period we will discuss, both in terms of the way the rules of the game were set up and the patterns of interaction that persisted.

Delimiting ‘belonging’ and access in independent Ceylon, c. 1948-1972

Ceylon became independent in 1948. As Tamil after Tamil phrased it when I was conducting field research in Colombo, practically the first act of the new government was to disenfranchise one community of Tamils. The United National Party government that was in power at the moment of independence, with the support of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress passed three legislative acts—the Citizenship Act (1948), the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act

¹⁸ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict*, Hurst, London, 1988 discusses the politics of this era in considerable detail.

No. 3 (1949) and the Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) Amendment Act, No. 48 (1949). These effectively disenfranchised the Tamils who had been brought in to work on the tea estates of the central highlands, during the colonial period. These Tamils were not considered Sri Lankans and they were citizens of neither India nor Sri Lanka. One consequence of this was that the representation of Kandyan Sinhalese rose dramatically with this change. Consistent with their politics in the colonial period, part of the Tamil leadership voted with the ruling party on this question. The Tamil Congress split on the issue and the Federal Party (Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi) was formed in 1949. While the Sri Lankan Tamils otherwise consider themselves distinct from these Tamils, they cite this disenfranchisement as the first perfidious act of the independent Sri Lankan state. In the post-colonial period, this is almost the only point at which the story of Tamil grievances against the state takes cognizance of the Hill-country/ Plantation Tamils.

The language issue has been contentious in every part of South Asia. Debate began in the colonial period itself on the question of official and national languages. Anti-Hindi and anti-Urdu agitations marked the first decade of independence in India and Pakistan respectively. In Sri Lanka, although it had been proposed that Sinhala should be the sole official language¹⁹ but intra-elite consensus prevailed and it was agreed that both Sinhala and Tamil should be so adopted. After independence, this consensus was challenged by a groundswell of opinion among members of the Sinhala-educated middle-class (in particular, journalists, Sinhala-medium teachers and *ayurvedic* practitioners—with the support of some sections of the Buddhist sangha. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike had formed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1951, and in 1956 forged a coalition of parties called the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna. This coalition swept the 1956 elections and majoritarian populism won its first political victory in Sri Lanka.

The new government passed the Official Language Act (1956), which made Sinhala the one official language of Sri Lanka with no reference at all to Tamil. This reinforced Tamil fears stemming from the colonial period that their cultural and economic rights were under threat. They protested this legislation vehemently. Bandaranaike and S.C. Chelvanayakam, the leader of the Federal Party, arrived at an agreement whereby Tamil was recognized as one of the national languages and the language of administration in Tamil-majority areas. The agreement also provided for some decentralization to provincial councils. Bandaranaike also agreed to reconsider the disenfranchisement of the Hill-country Tamils.²⁰ In the meanwhile, however,

¹⁹ In 1944 by J.R. Jayawardene. See C.R. de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History*, Vikas, 1987, pp. 238.

²⁰ Mohan Ram, *Sri Lanka: The Fractured Island*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 39-40.

random attacks on Tamils increased through 1957, and in 1958, riots broke out all over the island—by Tamils in the north and east and by Sinhalese in other areas. Faced with a hostile opposition and shaky support within his own party, Bandaranaike unilaterally rescinded the pact in April 1958. However, a law was passed whereby regulations providing for the use of Tamil in a variety of contexts could be created. Nothing actually happened until the return of the United National Party to power in 1965.

In 1965, the Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact was signed. The two leaders agreed on the establishment of district rather than provincial councils. This was a compromise for both sides—the UNP had to step back from its opposition to devolution and the Federal Party had to settle for district rather than provincial councils. It was also agreed that regulations would be passed for the use of Tamil in the northern and eastern areas and that the relocation of Sinhalese to newly irrigated areas in the north would be restricted. In 1969, this pact too was abandoned in the face of majority protests.

Ceylon had been moving towards universal free education as early as the colonial period. In 1970, it was decided to remedy the ethnic imbalance in education. Tamils appeared to gain entrance to university in numbers vastly out of proportion with their actual population. This it was decided to weight the results of students from different educational media (Tamil or Sinhala) to allow the students from Sinhala-medium schools a better chance at university admissions. Over the next few years, several schemes were tried and a district-based quota was maintained after 1974. The consequence of this ‘standardization’ was that the numbers of Tamil students at university dropped dramatically. Universal free education, swabasha education (each student to be educated through the medium of their native tongue) and standardization gave rise to a generation of literate youth, unable to find work and unable to pursue higher education.

That this was not restricted to Tamil youth is exemplified by the Janata Vimukti Peramuna’s insurrection in 1971. However, among Tamils this was compounded by the history of state policies and abrogated agreements that reinforced their alienation. The three landmark policy changes of this period—the citizenship laws, language policy and standardization—had two consequences: one, what might have been merely posturing in the previous period (that the Tamils would face discrimination if they were not assertive) seemed now to be true, and two, unlike the policy changes on representation introduced in the earlier period, these affected the vast majority of Tamils. Universal adult franchise in this period also heightened the potential for politics to become divisive.

The 1972 constitution would, then, have appeared as the culmination of this calculated attempt by the state to exclude the Tamils from what should rightly have been their place in Ceylonese society. This constitution renamed the country 'Sri Lanka,' setting up a unitary, Sinhala Buddhist state with a strong cultural mandate.

By 1972, the veneration of pluralism had slipped decisively from the mainstream political parties who needed to adopt the mantle of protecting the majority in order to stay in power. In the meanwhile, the events of the previous decades had gradually taken politics out of the hands of the elite who were always able to arrive at some modus vivendi. Political mobilization had far outstripped the capacity of the state to accommodate or respond. It seems inevitable that, in these circumstances, the next stage should be marked by violence.

Riots, terror and civil war, interspersed with negotiation 1972-2002

With the introduction of the new constitution, hindsight suggests that the battle-lines had been drawn between the Sri Lankan state, which had become more or less identified with the Sinhalese-Buddhist community, and the Sri Lankan Tamils. In 1974, the Federal Party, some parts of the Tamil Congress and the Ceylon Workers' Congress joined forces to form the Tamil United Front. In 1976, they adopted the Eelam Resolution and the organization was renamed Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). In the same period, the younger members of the TUF/TULF took up arms. At this stage, the senior leadership indulged, supported and even defended them in court.

The TULF had its own militant wing, the Tamil Youth Front (TYF). The Tamil Students' Federation was founded in 1970, renamed Tamil New Tigers and finally, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1975. Other significant groups were the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS). In the early years, membership sometimes overlapped. All of these groups (and others) received support and training from the Indian intelligence establishment. The Indians used this leverage to play them against each other. The result was that a good part of their energies and resources were spent in fratricidal attacks (some of which occurred on Indian soil). A. J. Wilson identifies two events as being pivotal in sparking

this militancy.²¹ The first was the police assault in January 1974 on Tamils gathered in Jaffna for an international conference on Tamil. The second was the burning of the Jaffna library in 1981.

In 1977, there was a changing of the guard again in Colombo. Post-election violence, directed initially at the losing Sri Lanka Freedom Party, took an anti-Tamil turn. As the violence escalated, the blame game began. The official inquiry attributed the violence to tensions arising in reaction to Tamil secessionism and the Tamils blamed secessionism on growing discrimination against them.²² Rioting in 1977 and 1981 affected both Sri Lankan Tamils and Plantation Tamils. The militants became more and more active in the north. In 1983, the LTTE conducted an attack on a military convoy en route to a conference, threats and a successful call to boycott the elections. That the TULF was no longer uncritically supportive of the LTTE was clear, but the TULF fared poorly at the elections, and it appeared that the LTTE was gaining the political base that the TULF was losing.

In May and June 1983, assaults by the militants and arson by the armed forces became frequently. These spread from north and east to the Peradeniya campus. In July 1983, riots broke out in Colombo and rapidly spread elsewhere. Tamil homes and businesses were attacked and it is reported that over 4000 were killed in the first four days of the riots.²³ Often described as a pogrom, this crisis converted many Tamils to the secessionist cause. Thousands of Tamils fled Sri Lanka, seeking asylum in India, Australia and many western countries. With this influx, and the precedent of the East Pakistan crisis, perhaps direct Indian intervention was inevitable. This refugee community was henceforth (like refugee communities elsewhere) to become fertile ground for recruitment to the militant groups and also for financial support, both through propaganda and extortion. The internationalization of this internal conflict was near-complete at this stage.

After 1983, the scores of individual assaults, isolated bomb blasts, sporadic riots and military efforts were woven tragically into one messy web. For members of every community, life changed forever. What could be construed as 'normal' was not to be the same again. My field research in Colombo in 1996 felt like one long condolence visit as people tried to describe the changes in their world in the last one and a half decades. A whole generation has grown up with the everyday reality of the conflict and in the suburbs and ghettos of the diaspora. This is a

²¹ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2000, pp. 125.

²² Mohan Ram, *Sri Lanka: The Fractured Island*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 51.

²³ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2000, pp. 161.

temporal distance at which memory is selective, but sharpened by the stories you have told and heard repeatedly.

From this point on, India took on another role: that of constitutional and conflict resolution counselor to the Sri Lanka. In this role, given its continuing relationship with the militant groups, the mantle of mediator also fell on its shoulders. In 1984, an All-Party Conference met in Colombo following Indian initiatives. However, given the range of entrenched positions in the conference and the combination of separate efforts by the Sri Lankan government and the militants to belittle the TULF, it failed rather predictably. In 1985, Bhutan played host to two rounds of talks between representatives of several militant groups who spoke as one delegation and representatives of the Sri Lankan government. The Tamil delegation placed before the Sri Lankan government a set of principles that have come to define the Tamil position in the current negotiations:

1. Recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a distinct nationality;
2. Recognition of an identified Tamil homeland and the guarantee of its territorial integrity;
3. Based on the above, recognition of the inalienable right of self-determination of the Tamil nation;
4. Recognition of the right to full citizenship and other fundamental democratic rights of all Tamils, who look upon the Island as their country.

The Thimphu Principles, as they are referred to, did not preclude the willingness of the delegation to consider any Sri Lankan proposals.²⁴ Even as the talks continued, there was mounting pressure on the government not to negotiate until the militants halted their terror tactics and the Sinhalese of the north-east returned to their homes. Further, notwithstanding the ceasefire that India had facilitated prior to the talks, both sides traded allegations of violation and in August 1985, the Tamil delegation walked out of the talks, claiming that the Sri Lankan state had made it impossible to negotiate by its continuing use of force.

India took on an even greater role at this point, exercise its leverage with both sides and mediating directly. Several rounds of proposals were exchanged. As the LTTE emerged dominant among the Tamil groups, the Indian government both recognized it by singling Prabhakaran out for an invitation to Bangalore at the time of the 1986 SAARC summit and also made a point of underscoring the limits to its support by raiding LTTE offices in Madras.

²⁴ Ketheshwaran Loganathan, *Sri Lanka: Lost Opportunities*, Centre for Policy Research and Analysis, Colombo, 1996, pp. 105. This book is an excellent, detailed account of the events of this time.

Meanwhile, there was no let-up in the fighting, and now with the other groups decimated by its fratricidal campaign, the LTTE bore the brunt of the Sri Lankan forces' efforts. As Sri Lankan Air Force attacks on Jaffna mounted, people on the peninsula began to run out of essential supplies. In June 1987, after several diplomatic efforts, India unilaterally sent IAF planes into Sri Lankan airspace to drop food and medical supplies over Jaffna. This controversial action precipitated secret talks and on July 29, 1987, the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement to Establish Peace and Normalcy in Sri Lanka was signed.

The accord sought to ensure the sovereignty and integrity of Sri Lanka, the rights of every ethnic group within a pluralistic framework and the recognition of the north and east as areas where Sri Lankan Tamils had lived. Two important provisions thereof were the reinstatement of the provincial councils and the stationing of the Indian Peace-keeping Force.

On the first score, the Northern and the Eastern provinces were to be merged, subject to a referendum held in the Eastern province within a year. The Provincial Councils Bill and the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution were passed in 1987 and in spite of the inevitable protests, the North-eastern Province was created in 1988. The Provincial Councils Act detailed the procedure to be followed in the councils, the Provincial Public Service, sources of finance for the councils, and interim provisions for uniting more than one province into an administrative unit. The Thirteenth Amendment specified the place of the Province in the power structure of the state. In 1987, the Pradeshiya Sabhas Act was passed, establishing Pradeshiya Sabhas. For almost two years, the EPRLF ran a provincial government in the Eastern province.

The other provision of the 1987 Accord was the stationing of the Indian Peace-keeping Force in Sri Lanka. The IPKF went in to disarm the militants and every group other than the LTTE surrendered arms. The LTTE, which had been close to the Indian government, held out and as it turned out, went to war with the IPKF. In a very short span, the Indian forces became the enemy, and stories still abound as to the atrocities committed by them in the Jaffna area. Caught as they were in unfamiliar territory, fighting an enemy who used guerilla tactics and innovative terror techniques, the IPKF was waging a war that made even less sense than usual. This war went from senseless to surreal when President Premadasa's government began to surreptitiously assist the Tigers in their war with the IPKF.

This last twist is incomprehensible and unconscionable from the Indian point of view. From the LTTE point of view, it is perfectly rational. On the one hand, it helped them get rid of the IPKF. On the other, it left them with a stockpile of weapons that they could use against the

Sri Lankan army as well. From the point of view of the Sri Lankan government, it only makes sense when you take into account what was happening in the south.²⁵

The arrival of the IPKF was the catalyst for the outbreak of the second Janata Vimukti Peramuna insurrection. This time around, the economic issues of the first insurrection in 1971, were coupled with a new Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism and anti-India/IPKF sentiment, provided the fuel for their two year reign of terror in the southern part of the island. Sandwiched between the Tigers in the north and the JVP in the south, President Premadasa walked the tightrope between appeasing the Tigers and getting rid of the Indians at some peril. In the end, it was the Tigers who assassinated him. The IPKF was withdrawn in 1990. With the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, India disengaged from the conflict, keeping a watching brief over events as they evolved.

IPKF or not, the conflict, verily a war, continued. The LTTE combines several techniques of war—fighting pitched battles when they need, using guerilla tactics like ambushes and now land-mines, attacking buildings and installations with bombs or guns or both and suicide assassinations.

In 1994, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's People's Alliance was elected with a mandate to negotiate peace. A one hundred day ceasefire ensued. At one level, the negotiations for negotiations began well. However, it may be questioned in hindsight whether either side had the will to take the exercise to its conclusion. The LTTE is said to have come to the talks with a flag of Eelam, and the government seemed unable to concede any of their initial demands. Finally, the LTTE issued an ultimatum to the government with really short notice and the ceasefire ended there.²⁶

Although the Kumaratunga government's strategy of combining negotiation with military campaign may raise important political and ethical questions, it is with Kumaratunga's accession to power, that the saga of the devolution packages begins. 'Devolution packages' were proposed in August 1995, January 1996 and several times thereafter, culminating in a failed attempt to have the Sri Lankan Parliament pass a new constitution in 2000. While beginning well, the Kumaratunga government squandered its credibility on the peace issue over time with its increasing reliance on the military option. This only brought huge war expenditures, depletion

²⁵ For an interesting account of what happened in this period, see Dayan Jayatilleka, *The Year 1989/90: The Premadasa-LTTE Talks, Why they failed—and What really happened*, in *Negotiating peace in Sri Lanka: Efforts, Failures & Lessons*, edited by Kumar Rupesinghe, International Alert, London, 1998, pp. 173-186.

²⁶ The successes and failures of different rounds of talks are discussed exhaustively in Ketheshwaran Loganathan, *Sri Lanka: Lost Opportunities*, Centre for Policy Research and Analysis, Colombo, 1996 and *Negotiating peace in Sri Lanka: Efforts, Failures & Lessons*, edited by Kumar Rupesinghe, International Alert, London, 1998

of the armed forces through death, casualties and desertions, growing militarization of society as a consequence of the protracted war, the access to weaponry and the presence of army deserters, eroding legitimacy among the Tamil community who could not reconcile the peace-maker and the war-leader.

The LTTE has kept up its end and continued its campaign of terror and assassination, targeting moderate Tamil leaders in addition to government officials. One of the questions that used to be asked even a few years ago was: “With whom should the government negotiate?” Today, the misgivings about the LTTE remain. It is an organization that has shown virtuosity and complete ruthlessness in its use of violence and terror. The Tamil people have not elected it. Indeed, it has targeted many of them and there is a tangible fear of the LTTE among Tamils. However, there is no one else left alive, there is a real perception that the Tigers are the only thing that have stood between the Tamils and more pogroms and a sense that, all said and done, it is the relentless campaign of the Tigers that has brought this moment to pass.

In December 2001, there was a changing of the guard. The United National Party was returned to a Parliamentary majority, creating a French-style ‘cohabitation’ government, where the Prime Minister is from the UNP and the President from the PA. On the 19th of December 2002, the LTTE declared a month-long ceasefire, which the government reciprocated on the 21st. This was extended first by a month and then permanently, in order to facilitate talks. A ‘Secretariat to Coordinate the Peace Process’ has been set up in the Prime Minister’s Office. Having searched for a venue that was acceptable to both sides, it was agreed that the talks should be held in Thailand. While there are two primary interlocutors in this process, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress has made it known that it believes that it should not only be present at the talks but also a power-sharing partner in the Eastern Provinces. The leadership of the Ceylon Workers’ Congress, which advocates the interests of the Estate Tamils, has also made a point of meeting the LTTE leadership. The ‘Pongu Thamizh’ celebrations in the east have riled the Sinhalese, but more devastating is the critique by the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) in their latest report.²⁷ In addition to raising questions about the conduct of the LTTE during the ceasefire period, in which abduction of children and youths to serve as child soldiers has continued, about the kind of leadership provided by the Tigers in the areas they administer, this report questions what the Tamils are celebrating, how genuinely and why. Allegations of

²⁷ University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), *Towards a Totalitarian Peace: The Human Rights Dilemma*, Special Report No: 13, May 10th, 2002.

violations are bandied about, and still, one is afraid to say, this may be the best shot at peace so far.

III. Looking Around and Ahead

On the 11th of September, 2001, as I came out of my classroom and heard what had happened to the World Trade Center towers, not two hours away from where I teach, I thought of Colombo on the day of the Central Bank bombing. So many of the issues that my study of Sri Lanka touches on, are salient to this strange new age when we fight a ‘war against terrorism.’

When the US decided to bomb Afghanistan in order to smoke out Osama bin Laden, and the international community concurred, equally stunned at what they had watched over and over on television, they set an important and dangerous precedent. For decades, countries, and Sri Lanka is one of them, have been fighting terrorism using fair methods and foul, and they have always been held to an international normative consensus on human rights. This is a consensus that has always been honored more in the breach. However, when outrage mounted on the 11th of September, it was natural for other victims of terrorism to say, “Well, now do you see what we have contended with all these years?” The contrast between the global cooperation with the US on this war, and the years of opprobrium they have faced for doing much the same, is not lost on them. Nor is the import of this new precedent. The danger is not just that some abstract standard of human rights conduct is being violated. In a case like Sri Lanka, it is that the very conditions that spawned the LTTE and other militant youth groups are perpetuated when you conduct nightly air raids, make arbitrary arrests or censor the press. Far from approaching resolution, you render the conflict more intractable.

The other old story that has been in the news in the last year is that of the transnational linkages that keep conflicts going. When money, arms and recruits are apparently inexhaustible, there is no limit to how long a war can go on. However, it is said that one of the reasons that the LTTE was ready for this ceasefire is that in the aftermath of the war on terrorism, its support bases, financial networks and safe havens are all under threat. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (<http://www.satp.org>), an online database on terrorist movements in South Asia, reports that the LTTE trains a large percentage of the militant outfits in the region. It is also (indeed Sri Lanka is) a conduit for arms and drugs too. The question that arises is what impact a peace, followed possibly by their retirement from combat, will have on those other militant outfits.

What sort of peace will a weakened Sri Lankan state and an exhausted LTTE forge? That is what remains to be seen. It will have to be an equitable, sustainable peace. It will have to

create, not merely new institutions, but new processes to facilitate both remembering and forgetting. If Thailand yields an accord, the easy part will be done. It is upon their return that the Tigers must start delivering on the tomorrow in whose name they have offered so many as sacrifice. It is upon their return that the Sri Lankan government's representatives must contend with the consequences of two devastating decades.