

By Alfred Jeyaratnam Wilson with
A. Joseph Chandrakanthan

Tamil Identity & Aspirations

Two nations, one island — the immanent dichotomy

Constructed for the administrative convenience of British colonial rulers, a unified Ceylon first came into being in 1833. Given that Tamils would always be the minority in such a state, there was a risk that their long-standing political and cultural autonomy could become threatened and undermined. Nevertheless, as the 19th century progressed, Tamils proved especially responsive to the educational opportunities provided by Christian missionaries from Britain and elsewhere. Combining as they did educational advantage with entrepreneurial flair, Tamils moved *en masse* not only into the colonial administration, but also into property and commercial enterprise in Colombo and the Western Province.

With education and property the qualifications for franchise and political representation, Tamils entered the Ceylonese political main-

stream in relatively large numbers and came to acquire an avowed interest in the unitary colonial system, deriving from it power, prestige and prosperity. As long as these benefits continued to accrue to them, the new Tamil elite were content not only to exist within a unified Ceylon, but also to play a key role in its leadership and management.

The Buddhist revival

Throughout the 19th century, many Sinhalese came to feel that their ancient culture had been and was continuing to be threatened by a series of hostile, external forces — of Dravidian Indian expansionism, international trade, Christian proselytisation, colonialism and modernity. Fearful that their unique Sinhala language and Buddhist religion were in jeopardy, some developed a marked 'minority complex', perceiving themselves besieged on their remote island home. As the Tamil presence in the colonial administration, the

Schoolgirl cycles through Jaffna



professions and business increased, it was often conflated and identified with these 'invading' influences. Moreover, as it prospered under the British, the Tamil community's educated sector increasingly looked down on its Sinhalese counterparts, provoking further anxieties and resentments.

Sinhalese fears of being culturally 'swamped' both spurred and were reinforced by a Sinhala Buddhist revival in the second half of the 19th century. This revival reasserted a world view through which many Sinhalese perceived themselves a people of manifest destiny, invested by Lord Buddha with the responsibility of protecting the *Dhammadeepa*, the 'island of the just', the ancient home of pristine Buddhist society. Tamils had long regarded both themselves and the Sinhalese as founding peoples of Ceylonese culture and history. The Buddhist revival forcefully repudiated this view; Ceylon was the *Dhammadeepa* and no more. It also sanctified the gradual emergence of an exclusivist consciousness among some Sinhalese politicians.

The path to independence

In the build-up to independence, managed by the British, majority interests were given an indirect boost, at the expense of the minority Tamil elite, when universal suffrage was recognised in 1931. At the same time, the emerging Sinhalese national movement sought to strengthen its hand by demanding proportionate representation for ethnic groups within the new indigenous legislature.

With hindsight, it is clear that the Tamil minority could not expect their disproportionate parliamentary representation to continue, and that alternative strategies should have been explored to safeguard their bureaucratic, professional and commercial interests. Nevertheless, Tamil leaders did not give adequate thought to the promise of federalism, or even to the possibilities of a bill of rights or a second parliamentary chamber. Unprepared to perceive itself as a provincial elite or a minority interest group, the Tamil leadership

The state-sector employment of minorities in Sri Lanka (1990)

(source: Census of Government and Public Sector employees, Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 1992; table reproduced from *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*, Minority Rights Group, 1996)

Ethnic group	population %	state services %	provincial services %	semi-government services %
Ceylon Tamil	12.7	5.9	7.1	8.2
Muslim	7.4	2.0	4.6	1.0
Up-country Tamil	5.5	0.1	0.2	0.5

It is clear that all Tamil-speaking communities are currently under-represented in the state bureaucracy. In 1949, however, Tamil recruitment to the general clerical service stood at 41 per cent.

spent the years leading to independence lobbying for 50-50 communal representation within a centralised legislature.

Unsurprisingly, their struggle was fruitless. Having secured naval and air bases in Ceylon and the safeguarding of commercial interests, the British had little interest in accommodating the 'communalist' demands of Tamil leaders. By February 1948, a markedly majoritarian constitution had been promulgated and the conservative Sinhalese, D. S. Senanayake, was the first prime minister of independent Ceylon. The stage was set for increasing Sinhalese domination.

A balance restructuck?

In the 30 years from the mid-1940s, successive governments took measures to reduce the disproportionate number of Tamils in the professions and the public sector. These measures interacted in diverse and complex ways with a potent Sinhala Buddhist exclusivism which gradually became an animating ideology of the Ceylonese, later Sri Lankan, state.

The first measure which undermined Tamil power within the state bureaucracy was the 1944 introduction of universally free education from kindergarten to university. The general educational improvement this engendered reduced the advantages of missionary-edu-

cated Jaffna Tamils and enabled even poor Sinhalese to compete for government jobs. The growing pool of powerful Sinhalese politicians and qualified candidates greatly increased Sinhalese ethnic patronage within the government bureaucracy. With the competition for limited openings ever growing, however, supply could never match demand. Particularly among the *arriviste*, lower caste Sinhalese, the spread of anti-Tamil chauvinism was soon perceived as a promising means of increasing economic opportunity. As time passed, the electoral promise of pandering to this chauvinism tempted even the most cosmopolitan of Sinhalese politicians.

The second remedial measure which ensured a reduction of Tamils in the employment sector was the 1960 nationalisation programme which removed all secondary schools from the control of private bodies and the churches. This move subjected the provision of educational opportunity to the political machinations of the centralised, and Sinhalese-dominated, public sector. In time, Tamil schools in the north and east would be deprived of funding and equipment to the obvious detriment of future Tamil job-seekers.

The third adverse effect on Tamil employment prospects came from the government's evolving language policy. The introduction of the 1956 'Sinhala Only' Act, which replaced English with Sinhala as the language of offi-

cial government business, clearly disadvantaged large numbers of Tamils. Its effect was compounded by widespread protests in Tamil areas in which school principals would not allow the teaching of Sinhala while school children refused to study the language.

The final straw, however, was the introduction in the early 1970s of communal quotas for university entrance. This led to the exclusion of merit-worthy Tamil students and it was this that set the ethnic powder keg alight. With 'standardisation', it became clear that the Tamils had lost the education and employment opportunities which had conditioned their commitment to a unitary Ceylon in the first place. Large numbers of young Tamils came to the conclusion that their socio-economic aspirations could only be fulfilled within a separate Tamil state.

Defensive Tamil nationalism

As Tamil 'privilege' spurred the development of a potent Sinhalese nationalism, so Sinhalese domination of the post-independence state fostered a defensive Tamil nationalism. By the mid 1970s, mainstream Tamil politicians were publicly advocating the establishment of a separate state in which Tamils could once more enjoy the educational and employment opportunities denied them in the new Sinhalese Sri Lanka. Moreover, while their espousal of federalism throughout the 50s and 60s had won them deferential support among the Tamil people, the clarity of this new position caught the imagination of the public and was welcomed enthusiastically throughout Tamil areas.

In the 1977 parliamentary elections, the recently formed Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), running on a secessionist platform, received a convincing mandate throughout the north and east. This confirmed that Sri Lanka was now inhabited by two nations, each perceiving itself as endangered, and each demanding its own concept of self-determination to guarantee economic opportunities and preserve cultural identity.

Emerging identities, frustrated aspirations

The wars that have raged in Sri Lanka since 1983 are fuelled by the refusal of many Tamils to operate within a state system which denies them the political power, employment and educational opportunities which their dignity and diligence demand. Through these difficult years, and especially after it became clear that the Indian government would not permit a separate sovereign state in its backyard, Ceylon Tamils have continued to develop a keenly independent and radically assertive identity with both political and cultural dimensions.

In politics, this identity was reflected in a new generation of leaders such as Veluppillai Pirabhakaran, head of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and present-day leader of militant Tamil nationalism. Pirabhakaran, unlike previous Tamil political leaders, comes from a non-elite social group of warrior sailors from the northern coastal belt. He is a self-taught man whose political and military sophistication have been forged not through an elite liberal education, but through the pains of revolutionary struggle and sacrifice. Embodying the transformation of Ceylon Tamil society, Pirabhakaran has won support and respect from Ceylon Tamils of all social groups despite breaking the moulds of traditional Tamil leadership.

In the cultural realm, a new generation of Ceylon Tamil artists have also steered an independent path, rooting their work explicitly in immediate social conditions. Inspired by the pioneers of socially aware Tamil literature (the late K. Kailasapathy (1933-82), the late S. Vithiyananthan (1924-88) and the contemporary savant, K. Sivathamby), recent plays, poetry, fiction and songs have openly explored the horror, repression and heroism of the Eelam wars. In recording the social price of the war and the changes it has wrought within the Tamil nation, contemporary artists have occasionally drawn the wrath of both the Sri

Tamil cultural revivalism in the 1960s and 70s

Between 1967 and 1976, a series of conferences was organised by a group of cultural revivalists which came to be known as the International Association of Tamil Research (IATR). Held in Kuala Lumpur, Chennai (Madras), Paris and Jaffna, these conferences instigated a world-wide awakening to Tamil culture, religion, language and literature. In Sri Lanka, there could not have been a greater fillip to the burgeoning Tamil nationalism. The IATR events blended into the ferment of Sinhalese repression and, later, Indian political duplicity to breed a new and muscular Ceylon Tamil identity increasingly independent from Chennai and southern India.

“Although lacking a formal electoral mandate, the LTTE administration enjoyed the active co-operation of a substantial proportion of the civilian population”

Lankan government and the LTTE. At the same time, however, they have successfully consolidated modes of art and literature which are distinctly Ceylon Tamil.

The *de facto* state of Tamil Eelam

Reinforcing the emergence of an independent, self-confident and socially inclusive Ceylon Tamil identity, the LTTE have effectively governed significant portions of north and east Sri Lanka for extended periods since 1989. The most significant example of LTTE 'governance' was the quasi-state established in Sri Lanka's northern province between 1990 and 1995. This administration comprised a number of distinct structures dealing with central functions of government from the administration of justice to economic development and social provision.

The judiciary of Sri Lanka's northern province all but collapsed during the latter years of the 1983-89 war, but was resurrected under LTTE auspices in 1992. To underscore and guide its emergent judiciary, the LTTE published a 'code of law' which was periodically and publicly amended and strictly applied. Police stations were re-opened in almost all townships. LTTE police were unarmed yet presided over a sharp drop in major crimes. Many northern Tamils expected and relied on them to adjudicate such common problems as community feuds, illegal distilling of liquor, drunkenness and petty robbery.

In the area of economic development, the LTTE established the Tamil Eelam Economic Development Organisation (TEEDOR) which co-ordinated and promoted a range of research and development activities in the fields of agriculture, industry and infrastructure. Most notably, TEEDOR funded and manned small industries from salt production to prawn farming, initiated long-term reforestation and road-building projects and collaborated with the Economic Consultancy House (TECH) of the University of Jaffna to study town planning and other development prospects. In 1993, to augment TEEDOR's activities, the Tamil Eelam

Bank was established, which stimulated small business and the deprived rural sector through the provision of revolving loans.

The *de facto* LTTE state also set about the rehabilitation and transformation of the north's social fabric. While co-ordinating the emergency distribution of food and other provisions, the LTTE also pursued a more ambitious social programme. In the field of education, systems were re-established for the conducting of examinations, the preparing of textbooks and curricula and the provision of facilities for displaced school children. Simultaneously, steps were taken to undermine entrenched inequities within northern Tamil society based on caste and gender. Among other initiatives, specific legislation was introduced to outlaw the giving and receiving of dowry and to open Hindu temples to previously proscribed lower caste groups.

Underwriting its varied activities, the *de facto* state worked through a general civil administration which raised revenue through a range of conventional methods from road vehicle taxes to the provision of passes (visas) for those leaving or entering its jurisdiction. Although lacking a formal electoral mandate, the LTTE administration enjoyed the active co-operation of a substantial proportion of the civilian population. Its institutions enhanced the credibility of the idea of Eelam and further consolidated a distinct Ceylon Tamil political identity.

The *de facto* state and the Sri Lankan government

The relationship between the LTTE-controlled quasi-state and the Sri Lankan government was complex and in many ways contradictory. Though for the duration of its existence, the quasi-state was subjected to a comprehensive economic embargo which caused great hardship to the civilian population, the north was little disturbed by direct military activity until mid-1995. Moreover, to maintain the fiction that it controlled its entire territory, the Sri Lankan government continued to underwrite the state

apparatus in all areas, even those under effective LTTE control. Hence, throughout the period of the LTTE quasi-state, the government paid its employees and maintained state equipment in the north through its own appointed agents, who worked under the effective control of the Tigers.

While clearly unsustainable in the long term, this arrangement contained the seeds of a viable solution to the war, ceding significant control of government resources to parties which could understand and to some extent articulate popular Tamil aspirations. Moreover, the devolution proposals unveiled in August 1995 by the current People's Alliance government were accepted by the constitutional (non-LTTE) Tamil parties as a starting point towards the realisation of Tamil national aspirations. The proposals fell short of offering a rigid federal framework, nor did they envisage an internally sovereign Tamil government within a confederation. The LTTE would have more readily accepted these latter options which would surely have paved a path to peace. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Tamil people, hankering for an end to their horrific tribulations, may have reconciled themselves to the government's compromise.

Simultaneous to the release of their proposals, however, the government sanctioned the military conquest and re-occupation of Jaffna, bringing down the *de facto* state and assaulting the Ceylon Tamils' gathering sense of self-reliant nationhood. This, and the subsequent bombing of densely-populated Tamil areas, have unleashed renewed waves of virulent resistance. Leading this resistance, the LTTE is disciplined, well-equipped, financed and organised for a lengthy military struggle and the army cannot predict, much less contain, its attacks. With political tensions also rising in the south, the government now faces financial ruin with war spending running well beyond its means.

Future prospects

Throughout the current, costly assault on LTTE-controlled areas, mainstream political opinion in Colombo has remained set fast

Constitutional voices in the Tamil national struggle

For various reasons relating to Indian government intervention in the Sri Lankan war, the Tamil national movement fractured in the mid-1980s. Before then, a number of militant organisations had advocated violence in their quest for Tamil self-determination. Between 1987 and 1989, however, all these groups bar the LTTE sought to join the avowedly constitutional Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in Sri Lanka's political mainstream.

Since that time, the formerly militant Tamil parties have precariously straddled the space between electoral politics and armed struggle. All except the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) have maintained a corps of armed and fighting cadres whose activities, particularly regarding the treatment of civilians, have undermined the constitutional credentials of their political leaders. Nevertheless, these leaders have largely assimilated into Sri Lanka's electoral and party politics.

All of the constitutional Tamil parties, including the TULF, began with a vision of an independent Eelam but are now committed to a federal system with substantive, and protected, devolution of power. They were all supportive of the first version of the present government's devolution proposals and TULF MPs advised in its drafting. All voiced doubts about later drafts, however, and all now oppose the government package.

The constitutional Tamil parties are severely critical of the LTTE on two main grounds. The first is the Tigers' lack of democratic practice in the areas they control. The second is the brutal methods employed by the LTTE against perceived government collaborators and other dissenters. In the past, most Tamil groups have lost leaders to LTTE assassination. While working with the Sri Lankan government to promote constitutionalism within Tamil politics, they continue to take huge personal risks.

against compromise. To curry favour with its ethnic Sinhalese constituency and protect its fragile parliamentary position, the government has twice watered down its devolution proposals. Even despite this, the opposition United National Party (UNP), whose support is required if the proposals are to pass into law, has steadfastly avoided co-operation and has instead published counter-proposals which have proved eminently unhelpful. Such behaviour in the context of Sri Lanka's darkest crisis is indicative of a stubborn mindset which renders many Sinhalese politicians incapable of accommodating cross-communal demands for self-determination.

Is there any hope of peace? It seems increasingly clear that the stabilisation of Sri Lanka will require significant action from the international community. While death and destruction have rained down on Sri Lanka, however, many, on both sides of the ethnic/national divide, have complained that the world has continued to look the other way. In recent months, this situation has changed somewhat with the banning of the LTTE by the United States and the increased vigilance over Tiger activities in other western nations. While these moves signal an increased engagement with the Sri Lankan crisis, they are more likely to drive the LTTE further underground, and make the conflict yet more intractable, than they are to dilute the guerrillas' capacities and determination. In the short term, therefore, there seems little cause for optimism.

As the situation deteriorates the likelihood increases that India will again intervene in the Sri Lankan conflict to safeguard regional security. Learning from the failures of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, and in deference to powerful Hindu and regionalist lobbies, the next intervention is likely to be more favourable to LTTE aspirations. It appears increasingly possible, in other words, that the obduracy of the Sinhalese political parties, their failure to respect and accommodate Tamil aspirations for equal opportunities and self-determination, may finally lay Eelam at the doorstep of the Tigers. ■