

B. H. FARMER

CEYLON

A DIVIDED NATION

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A Divided Nation

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With a Foreword by
The Right Honourable The Viscount Soulbury,
G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O., O.B.E., M.C.

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
FOREWORD <i>by</i> THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE VISCOUNT SOULBURY, G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O., O.B.E., M.C.	vii
INTRODUCTION	xi
I. THE LAND OF CEYLON AND ITS PEOPLING: FACT, MYTH AND CONFLICT	1
II. FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF FOREIGN RULE: THE PORTUGUESE AND THE DUTCH	16
III. FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF FOREIGN RULE: THE BRITISH IN CEYLON	33
IV. CEYLON SINCE INDEPENDENCE	59
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	73
MAPS	
Map 1 Ceylon: relief, climatic divisions and towns	xiv
Map 2 Ceylon: size and communal composition of District population according to the 1953 census.	60

FOREWORD

IN promoting the advance to self-government and independence of the various communities comprised within the British Commonwealth and Empire, the relations of minorities to majorities have constituted one of the most contentious and complicated problems confronting successive British Governments. Mr. Farmer's brilliant exposition of this problem, as it has affected Ceylon, provides a striking example of its complexity.

A Commission, of which I had the honour to be the Chairman, was appointed by the British Government in 1944, to examine and discuss proposals for the constitutional reform of Ceylon. It did not take long to discover that the relations of minorities to majorities, and particularly of the Tamil minority in the northern and eastern provinces to the Sinhalese majority further south, were in the words of the Commission's report 'the most difficult of the many problems involved'. The Commission had of course a cursory knowledge of the age-long antagonism between these two communities, but might have been less hopeful of a solution had Mr. Farmer's book been available to underline the deplorable effect of centuries of troubled history upon the Ceylonese of today. The Commission devoted a substantial portion of its report to this minority question, and stated that it was satisfied that the Government of Ceylon was fully aware that the contentment of the minorities was essential not only to their own well-being but to the well-being of the island as a whole. And to quote the Commission's report: 'If it were otherwise, no safeguard that we could devise would in the long run be of much avail.' Recent years have shown that this observation was only too true.

But had Mr. D. S. Senanayake, the first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon, lived I cannot believe that the shocking events of 1958 and the grave tension that now exists between Tamils and Sinhalese would ever have

FOREWORD

occurred. Mr. Senanayake would have scorned the spurious electoral advantages that a less far-sighted Sinhalese politician might expect to reap from exploiting the religious, linguistic and cultural differences between the two communities, for it was his policy to make Ceylon a united nation and, as he told the State Council in November 1945 in his great speech recommending the proposals of the British Government, 'The Tamils are essential to the welfare of this island'.

Unhappily and for reasons indicated by Mr. Farmer, the death of Mr. D. S. Senanayake led to the eventual adoption of a different policy which he would never have countenanced. Needless to say the consequences have been a bitter disappointment to myself and my fellow Commissioners. While the Commission was in Ceylon, the speeches of certain Sinhalese politicians calling for the solidarity of the Sinhalese and threatening the suppression of the Tamils emphasised the need for constitutional safeguards on behalf of that and other minorities, despite the confidence felt by the Commission in Mr. D. S. Senanayake and any Government under his control. As Sir Charles Jeffries has put it in his admirable book, *Ceylon—The Path to Independence*, 'The Soulbury constitution . . . had entrenched in it all the protective provisions for minorities that the wit of man could devise'. Nevertheless—in the light of later happenings—I now think it is a pity that the Commission did not also recommend the entrenchment in the constitution of guarantees of fundamental rights, on the lines enacted in the constitutions of India, Pakistan, Malaya, Nigeria and elsewhere.

Perhaps in any subsequent amendment of Ceylon's constitution those in authority might take note of the proclamation made by the delegates at the African conference which met in Lagos two years ago: 'Fundamental human rights, especially the right to individual liberty, should be written and entrenched in the constitutions of all countries'. Nevertheless the reconciliation of Tamils and

FOREWORD

Sinhalese will depend not on constitutional guarantees but on the goodwill, common sense and humanity of the Government in power and the people who elect it.

If, as I hope, Mr. Farmer's book will influence public opinion in that direction, he will have made a notable contribution to the peace and prosperity of Ceylon.

SOULBURY.

INTRODUCTION

We belong to one nation . . . Differences in language do not prevent us from being a nation . . .

I.D.S. and M.I. WEERAWARDENA¹

What are we left with? A nation in ruins, some grim lessons which we cannot afford to forget and a momentous question: Have the Sinhalese and Tamils reached the parting of the ways?

TARZIE VITTACHI²

WHEN Mr. Philip Mason, the Director of the Institute of Race Relations, first wrote to me about the possibility of producing a booklet about Ceylon he told me of a film unit that proposed round about 1948 to produce a documentary about that exquisite island and, seeking for a title, could find nothing more dramatic or sensational than *Ceylon: Island without Problems*. That could not possibly be the title of this booklet, for Ceylon in 1963, fifteen years after the coming of independence, abounds with problems, not least that of the relations between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minorities.

Or, to put the matter another way round, Ceylon was, for some years after it became independent on 4 February 1948, held up as a model for all the world of the way in which a colony might peacefully and by easy stages attain full independence without suffering those communal tensions that severed Pakistan from the Republic of India. Then, unheralded by premonitory rumbles felt in the outside world, there came in 1956 a period in which politics suddenly took on an air of instability; in which Cabinet dissension, the assassination of the Prime Minister (Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike) and states of emergency followed each other in quick succession; and in which communal disharmony led to a series of riots and to the particularly disgraceful clashes of 1958.

¹ I.D.S. and M. I. Weerawardena, *Ceylon and Her Citizens* (Madras, etc., Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 15.

² Tarzie Vittachi, *Emergency '58* (London, André Deutsch, 1958), p. 117.

What had happened to the apparently peaceful, well-governed and harmonious inter-community life of 1948? Was the harmony of 1948 more apparent than real? Have communal tensions a long history, or are they the product of new forces that have emerged in recent years? It is the object of this short booklet to seek the answer to these questions. It will begin to do so by sketching the main features of the island in which the Ceylonese have to live, for these features form the essential background to the tale that must be told and, further, have had not a little influence on the tale itself. This tale will then be taken up in order to demonstrate not only the origins of the various peoples and communities who may be called 'Ceylonese' but also the roots of the myths that the Ceylonese hold about each other, for these have had an important effect on attitudes and conduct. The effects of the move of the centre of gravity of Sinhalese settlement from the Dry Zone to the Wet Zone and the hills will then be examined; and this examination will be followed by an enquiry into the effects on inter-communal relations of the period of colonial rule, Portuguese, Dutch and British. Colonial rule was responsible for a revolution in the economy of Ceylon, and the new economy has many points of contact (which will be identified) with the peoples of Ceylon and the tensions between them. Finally, the present ethnic situation in Ceylon will be described; and the interaction of this situation on politics and of politics on this situation will be examined—for it is this interaction that brings the argument to the point at which, it is hoped, the present communal position in Ceylon will become reasonably clear.

Although this booklet is being published under the auspices of the Institute of Race Relations, I think it better not to describe the peoples of Ceylon (the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the rest) as 'races', a term which I am not alone, of course, in wishing to restrict to groups with recognisable, biologically inheritable differences (like skin colour) in common. Such has been the tangled ethnic history of

Ceylon's peoples and of their ancestors on the Indian mainland that it is extremely doubtful whether it is possible to distinguish, say, a 'Sinhalese racial type' or a 'Tamil racial type'. Certainly there are no obvious racial differences like those between European and African in South Africa. The peoples of Ceylon, however, differ markedly in terms of traditions, culture and attitudes, and accordingly are best described by using terms such as 'people', 'ethnic groups', or 'community'. Differences of caste and religion are also important.