

# SPLIT ASUNDER: FOUR NATIONS IN SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka today is a fractured polity and has been so for some time. This is a trite saying: everyone knows this. But in order to comprehend the process that brought about this tragic situation, one has to (a) understand the concept “nation,” (b) the power of nationalism, (c) the force of populism fostered by democratic institutions, (c) the deadly combination within the island of a specific demographic mix distributed in space in a peculiar manner and (d) the disastrous impact of a Westminster model of government elected under a scheme favouring candidates first-past-the-post during the period 1948-1972.<sup>1</sup>

Add to this a powerful historical interpretation deriving from Sinhala traditions retailed in dynamic process through multiple modes of cultural transmission (oral, iconic and literary) and reworked in Orientalist mode during the modern era to encourage both Sinhalese and non-Sinhalese to conceive of Ceylon’s (Sri Lanka) past as basically a story of the Sinhalese, so that many Sinhalese insidiously spoke of “Ceylonese” in the sense “Sinhalese” with part subsuming whole (cf. how, till recently, “English” meant “British”).<sup>2</sup> RESULT: a deadly ‘molotov cocktail’ that has, from the 1920s, hindered pragmatic political accommodation of the type that came into play in Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Britain and the Baltic states in recent centuries. Periodic negotiations on the subject from 1957 onwards have either produced no outcomes or resulted in ‘settlements’ that have come adrift for one reason or several.<sup>3</sup>

The most recent manifestation of this recurrent process has been unveiled by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by Mahinda Rajapakse when it presented a measly set of proposals on 1 May 2007 that focused on devolution at a district level rather than the provincial tier; and remained adamant in their attachment to “an unitary state.” Even moderate Tamils aligned with the governing party, such as Douglas Devananda, consider this a joke. As Sumanasiri Liyanage sums up the scheme, “the SLFP proposals ... have

demonstrated ... conclusively that the SLFP have not traveled forward in time but far back. Its 'fresh approach' to a 'complex problem' ... is in essence nothing more than the proposals of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1958, almost five decades ago! [To quote Marx, it seems that] history in Sri Lanka often repeats itself -- the first time as a tragedy and the second time as a farce. The SLFP proposals are totally disproportionate to the questions at hand."<sup>4</sup> In brief, the scheme is a *pus vedilla*, or dud shell, that leaves the island in the explosive form it has assumed for the past three decades.

### **The "nation" concept, 1948 and all that**

*Sīhaladvīpa*, *Ceilao*, Ceylon or Sri Lanka, as the island has variously been called at different times, has always had diverse bodies of people, "communities" bearing labels that are reproduced subjectively, relationally and dynamically. Some groups, such as the Colombo Chetties, Burghers and Malays in recent times, are tiny in number, others have been quite substantial. The term *Sīhaladvīpa* embodied a notion of overarching ideational sovereignty, that is, what can be called a form of "tributary overlordship" understood in pre-modern Asian vocabulary informed by the *mandala* concept, that which Tambiah has called a "galactic polity."<sup>5</sup> This situation was transformed when the British seized the island in two bites in 1796 and 1815-18 and proceeded to effect a thorough-going administrative unification underpinned by a modern communication system and the market principles of capitalism. Ceylon became a colonial unit, subject to the Colonial Office not the India Office.

In an era informed by the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment and the principles of the French Revolution the island peoples quickly imbibed the currents of liberalism and nationalism that were sweeping Europe. Nationalism meant an emphasis on the principle of self-determination and the democratic idea of popular sovereignty. Thus, from this point onwards, in contrast to the 16<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the concept "nation" was usually distinct from "tribe," with the latter downgraded to "primitive" status.<sup>6</sup> Hereafter, the privileged, prestigious concept of "nation" implied a claim for political rights. Thus understood, a nation was, first and foremost, a state of mind. Following Seton-Watson, but modifying him ever so slightly, one could say that Nation XY exists

when an articulate and powerful section of XY – note, a majority is not a requisite – says that XY is a nation.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense the Ceylonese nation emerged for the first time in 1850 when the periodical *Young Ceylon* was launched by a small coterie of English-educated young men.<sup>8</sup> It was sustained by the emerging multi-ethnic, indigenous middle class in the course of the next 100 years. The first momentous challenge to White superiority occurred, prophetically, on the cricket field when the best Ceylonese XI took on the best locally-resident Europeans in a “Test” [of excellence] in June, 1887.<sup>9</sup> Constitutional demands proper in the language of representation and liberalism commenced in 1906/07 and continuous badgering of the Colonial Office and its Governors eventually secured a transfer of power in 1948,<sup>10</sup> with the final steps being actually delayed by a parallel process in India – for the jewel in the British crown was a greater issue in geo-political terms.

But from the late nineteenth century there was also a parallel and partially overlapping current of Sinhala nationalism expressed by generations of Sinhalese (both Buddhist and Christian) who were more deeply rooted in Sinhala-speak but not without English capability. The leading edge in the agitation, however, was in the hands of the Westernized elite activists. Eventually, to cut a long story short, they reaped the rewards when Ceylon as an institutional nation came into being on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1948. D. S. Senanayake became the first Prime Minister of what was an institutional form of a nation based upon an ideology that, allowing for varying measures and with some caveats, be described as a trans-ethnic, pluralist Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) collective identity.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the period of anti-colonial initiative from circa 1850 to 1948 there were other currents such as Hindu and Buddhist revitalization projects; and activists from the other communities with significant demographic strength, namely, the Sri Lanka Tamils, the Moors, and the Indian Tamils (from the 1920s only), were players on the sidelines of competitive manoeuvre.

Significantly, though, the Sri Lanka Tamil spokesmen invariably referred to themselves as a “community” in their representations in English-speak. It was not till 1949 that SJV Chelvanayakam and other leaders, guided indirectly by Stalin’s *Marxism and the National Question*, vested their people with the badge “nation.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Tamil communitarianism became nationalism proper only in 1949. The SL Tamils, nevertheless, were Ceylonese through and through. So, Tamil nationalism was a sectional identity nestling as an entity within the broader aggregate known as Ceylonese.<sup>13</sup> Here again cricket is a touchstone: Tamils nourished in the primate city of Colombo were among its leading cricketers and cricket administrators, while the Colombo Oval, the home of the Tamil Union, was initially the island’s official cricket arena for international matches. When Ceylon contested teams from the Madras Cricket Association for the Gopalan Trophy annually from the early 1950s, the SL Tamils cheered the Ceylonese to a man.<sup>14</sup>

The ethnic differentiations within the category “Ceylonese,” of course, were not sustained only by political competition. Their foundational sources were (a) sets of cultural practices that, amidst commonalities, implanted difference in both explicit and insidiously powerful taken-for-granted ways and (b) widespread practices of endogamous marriage among the Sinhalese, Tamils and Moors that were in turn based on the propensity for Sinhalese and Tamil people to marry within their own caste – with the caste identities nestling differentially within each ethnic grouping.

Given such profound sociological foundations, the context of political competition from the 1947 general elections onwards served to widen the split in a disastrous, indeed tragic, manner. This is where the factors stressed at the outset of my essay kicked in – literally kicked in: the geo-politics of demographic distribution, the first-past-the-post electoral system under a Westminster form of constitution in the era 1948-72, the populist currents encouraged by the democratic principle and entrenched strands of historical interpretation which encouraged the Sinhalese majoritarian part (69 % in 1948, but eventually expanding as Indian Tamils shifted, or were shifted, back home) to subsume the Ceylonese whole in ways that implanted hegemonic, indigenist and chauvinist tendencies.

Taken together and in brief, these factors -- assisted, paradoxically, by socialist forces attacking the privileges commanded by the Westernized elites -- enabled Sinhala (cum Buddhist) forces to surge to power through the ballot in 1956 under a coalition provided by Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike and the SLFP. The key catch-cry was the slogan "Sinhala Only" which demanded the displacement of English by the Sinhala vernacular as the language of administration and in the process placed the Tamil vernacular in a secondary position. This transformation was quickly carried out and since then the growing power of a bureaucracy staffed by personnel attached to the principles of the "1956 ideology," with its thread of Sinhala chauvinism, has squeezed the Tamils of Sri Lanka further.<sup>15</sup> In the result, Tamil sectional nationalism became a separatist nationalism demanding the division of the Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) state.

Many studies have clarified the manner in which the language issue and the ramifying implications of the electoral transformation of 1956 resulted in increasing friction between the Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhalese activists and led Tamil leaders to advocate secession or Eelam from the mid-1970s, with the formal adoption of the Vadukoddai Resolution on 14 May 1976 marking this radical shift.<sup>16</sup>

This summary contention was supported recently with a special twist by a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam spokesman, Balakumaran.<sup>17</sup> Referring to the recent triumph of Mahinda Rajapakse of the SLFP-led coalition at the Presidential elections of 17 November 2005, he said this election brought back memories of the 1956 election victory of Sri Lanka Freedom Party leader S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, which "kick-start[ed] ethnic Sinhalese violence against [the Tamils] that led to eventual war." Balakumaran added: "it [was] because of 1956 that the seeds of the Tamil freedom struggle were sown.... Banda is the creator of Prabhakaran. Similarly Mahinda's victory is going to pave the way for Prabhakaran's victory. Banda started it. Mahinda is going to end it."<sup>18</sup>

In parenthesis here, let me note that, today, thirty years further down the track, the Tamil separatists themselves and the Sri Lankan state find themselves confronted by a Muslim Moor conglomeration of its dispersed elements (7-8 per cent of the population now and inching upwards steadily), that, however fractionated among themselves, are

not only claiming equivalent third party status in any negotiations, but fitfully presenting themselves as a “nation” too. As such, they say that they are entitled to some form of regional autonomy in the minute enclave in south-east Lanka that happens to lie within the lands designated as Eelam by Tamil nationalists. Thus, one witnesses Moor communitarianism of the immediate past moulded into a sectional nationalism that is not quite secessionist because it does not wish to breakaway from the Sri Lankan polity. What this movement wants is an adjustment upwards in both status and political clout. This grouping is not only armed with its own ethnic university in the enclave domain, but also bolstered by currents of Islamic fundamentalism and monies from the Arabian Peninsula. So we now have Muslim Moor sectional nationalism as a fourth force in the small island firmament.

### **Conclusion**

Balakumaran’s pithy characterisation of the Sinhala-Tamil divide sums up a tragic tale that has cost countless lives. The spiralling process of conflict can be interpreted as a typical outcome of democratic politics in a cultural context oriented towards revenge and feud.<sup>19</sup> But what is as infuriating as puzzling is the continuous failure of Sinhalese at the apex of power to learn from the past and to effect pragmatic compromises that will save the tenuous unity of the Sri Lankan polity.

Central to this failure is the refusal to countenance the existence of a Tamil nation as a state of mind and legitimate political force. This denial and its blindness regards the leading force of Tamil nationalism since 1986, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, as nothing other than terrorists, an epithet that is partly justified,<sup>20</sup> but which, as epithet, obscures accommodation. As I journeyed recently in a trishaw Colombo the driver (a key occupational category at the heart of urban, streetwise perceptions) told me that there was no ethnic problem. There was, he said, only a terrorist problem. It was a flat assertion that did not brook debate. It expressed a quarter truth rendered into whole truth and nothing but the truth, a shibboleth that has been expounded in recent years by many Sinhala politicians and intellectuals. a significant number of them are products of the 1956 overturn and its concomitant ideology. Among these beneficiaries were, and

are, the Rajapakse brothers at the apex of the present government and Wiswa Warnapala, one of the architects of the recent farcical SLFP proposals.<sup>21</sup>

As widespread shibboleth the trishaw man's statement represents one element in a corpus of thought among Sinhalese that is a major obstacle to pragmatic compromise.<sup>22</sup> Yes, there are Tamil dissidents in Lanka and elsewhere who do not side with the LTTE and a few who even hate them. It may be good *realpolitik* to drive a wedge between such Tamils and the LTTE. But these Tamils are caught in a sandwich situation between the proverbial rock and hard place. Those living in Sinhala majority regions are only too aware of the prejudices around them and the force of the 1956 mind-set, while having to put up with difficulties posed by the regular security checks (necessary as the latter are). Thus I return to my starting point: a mind-set nourished on a specific historical understanding and solidified in power by a legitimizing democratic process in 1956. This mind-set has buried itself in a cave – I shall call it Citadel Colombo. Over the past fifty years this 'cavish,' inbred nativism has generated another adamantine nationalism that is now bunkered down in its very own 'forested caves' in Mullaitivu. The two are embroiled in a deadly embrace of war,<sup>23</sup> feeding off each other and both as uncompromising as the other. Between the two of them, Citadel Colombo and Bunker Mullaitivu, the Sri Lankan nation has been split asunder.

Confederative Sri Lankan nationalism is dying.

<sup>1</sup> See Michael Roberts, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives: Barriers to Accommodation," *Modern Asian Studies* 1978, 12: 353-76. Also see A. J. Wilson, *Electoral Politics in an Emergent State*, Cambridge University Press, 1975; L. Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka: Social Change and Cultural Continuity*, London: Palgrave, 2001: 197 and Brendan O'Duffy, "LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Majoritarianism, Self-Determination and Military-to-Political Transition in Sri Lanka," in Marianne Heiberg, Brendan O'Leary, and John Tirman (eds.) *Terror, Insurgency, and the State. Ending Protracted Conflicts*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, pp. 259-60 & 264.

<sup>2</sup> Spelt out in M. Roberts, *Sinhala-ness and Sinhala Nationalism*, Colombo: Marga Institute, Series on A History of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, 2001, No. 4, pp. 11-23 and earlier in Roberts, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives: Barriers to Accommodation," *Modern Asia Studies* 1978, 12: 353-76, which is reprinted in Roberts, *Exploring Confrontation. Sri Lanka: Politics, Culture and History*, Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See Godfrey Gunatilleke, *Negotiations for the Resolution of the Ethnic Conflict*, Colombo: Marga Institute, Series on A History of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, 2001, No. 1 and Kumar Rupesinghe (ed.) *Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka - Efforts, Failures and Lessons*, Vol. I and II, Colombo: Foundation for Coexistence, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Liyanage, "From a Tragedy to a Farce: Comments on the SLFP Proposals," 1 May 2007, in <http://www.groundviews.org/2007/05/01/from-a-tragedy-to-a-farce-comments-on-the-slpf-proposals>. Also see Kelum Bandara, "Tamil Parties, UNP reject SLFP Proposals," *Daily Mirror*, 2 May 2007. The Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact was hammered out by the SLFP leader and the head of the (Tamil) Federal Party in 1957 as a political compromise in the wake of Tamil agitation against the new government's language policy. However, the agreement was unilaterally abrogated by Bandaranaike after an internal revolt within his party and pressure from a body of Buddhist monks.

<sup>5</sup> S. J. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, chap. 7 and M. Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period, 1590s-1818*, Colombo, Yapa Publications, 2004, pp. 59-68, 75-87.

<sup>6</sup> For changes in the meanings of these terms (and related ones), see M. Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period, 1590s-1818*, Colombo, Yapa Publications, 2004, pp. 95-105; Kenneth Minogue, *Nationalism*, London: Methuen, 1969, pp. 8-9; and C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridien. The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830*, London: Longman, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> For elaborations, see M. Roberts, "Stimulants and Ingredients in the Awakening of Latter-Day Nationalisms", in *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Marga Publications, 1979, pp. 214-42.

<sup>8</sup> M. Roberts, Percy Colin-Thome and Ismeth Raheem, *People Inbetween: The Burghers and the Middle Class in the Transformations within Sri Lanka, 1790s-1980s*, Colombo: Sarvodaya, 1989, pp. 56-69, 158-59, 169.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, "Landmarks and Threads in the Cricketing Universe of Sri Lanka," *Sport in Society*, January 2007, vol. 10, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> Roberts, "Elites, Nationalisms and the Nationalist Movement in British Ceylon," in M. Roberts (ed.) *Documents of the Ceylon National Congress and Nationalist Politics in Ceylon, 1929-1950*, Vol I, Colombo: Department of National Archives, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Senanayake's United National Party government, however, disfranchised the community known then as "Indian Tamils," mostly plantation workers but also having many port workers and other menials in Colombo. Even relatively moderate Ceylonese were prone to consider these recent immigrants as "aliens" with one foot in Sri Lanka and two feet in India.

<sup>12</sup> Roberts, "Nationalisms Today and Yesterday," in Gerald Peiris and S.W. R. de A. Samarasinghe (eds) *History and Politics. Millennial Perspectives. Essays in Honour of Kingsley de Silva*, Colombo: Law and Society Trust, 1999, pp. 23-44.

<sup>13</sup> See Roberts, "Problems of Collective Identity in a Multi-Ethnic Society: Sectional Nationalism vs Ceylonese Nationalism, 1900-1940," in *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Marga Publications, 1979, pp. 337-60.

<sup>14</sup> As I am from an active cricketing background dating from the mid-1950s, this evaluation is based on intimate personal knowledge. For the background, also see S. S. Perera, *The Janashakthi Book of Cricket, 1832-1996*, Colombo: Janashakthi Insurance, 1999.



<sup>15</sup> Apart from anecdotal evidence from personal knowledge, Neville Jayaweera has conveyed this view to me from his intimate personal experiences in Sri Lanka's administrative services in the period 1950s to 1972. Also see Vijaya Samaraweera, "The role of the Bureaucracy," *Ceylon Journal of Historical & Social Studies* (Special Number on Sri Lanka Since Independence) n.s. Vol IV, Nos. 1 & 2, Jan-Dec 1974, pp. 31-39.

<sup>16</sup> K. M. De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981 and Godfrey Gunatilleke, *Negotiations for the Resolution of the Ethnic Conflict*, Colombo: Marga Institute, Series on A History of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, 2001, No. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Balakumaran himself was at one time the leader of a major Tamil player, the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students, but as the LTTE secured ascendancy in the competition between the different Tamil militant groups and secured control of territory in the northern reaches, he became isolated and was giving the choice of collaboration or death. He chose silence and then moved to collaboration.

<sup>18</sup> Reuters report under heading, "Sri Lanka Rebel compares New President to Old Enemy," 19 November 2005, accessed via [www.LankaAcademic.org](http://www.LankaAcademic.org). Velupillai Prabhakaran (also written as Pirapāharan) is the head of the LTTE military force and its *de facto* state.

<sup>19</sup> On this dimension of Sri Lankan culture, a phenomenon that embraces all the ethnic groups and is referred to in Sinhala as *paligānīma* (striking back, sorcery in [legitimate] retaliation), see Gananath Obeyesekere, "Sorcery, Premeditated Murder and the Canalization of Aggression in Sri Lanka," *Ethnology* 1975, 14: 1-23 and Bruce Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1988, pp. 28-34, 46-48, 89-93, 99-116.

<sup>20</sup> "Partly justified" -- because of the LTTE's ruthless killings and attacks on occasions on purely civilian targets. However, the definition of "terrorism" is fraught with problems as the standard definition used by such analysts as Rohan Gunaratna does not encompass state terrorism. The fact remains that both sides in Sri Lanka have committed atrocities, enorous ones. Again, the attacks on the person and property of those deemed Tamil in July 1983 was nothing but a pogrom carried out by a combination of state functionaries and ordinary people, one that terrified and "terrorised" most Tamils living in Sinhala-majority districts.

<sup>21</sup> Warnapala is presently Minister for Higher Education. As a lecturer in the Department of Economics, Peradeniya University, he was one of my colleagues within the Faculty of Arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was then a protégé of the Wijeyeratne family from his home locality in Kegalle and firmly aligned with the SLFP. He is among a significant number of university teachers of that era, some who were then staunch Trotskyists, who take a hard right-wing line on the ethnic conflict. My comments on the strength of what I have termed "the 1956 ideology" are coloured by both my experiences in the era 1956-75 and by considerable acquaintance with those of that generation who now advocate what I deem to be a chauvinist position.

<sup>22</sup> See the references in fn. 1 and 2 and also Roberts, "Primordialist Strands in Contemporary Sinhala Nationalism in Sri Lanka: *Urumaya* as *Ur*," and "Burden of History: Obstacles to Power Sharing in Sri Lanka," Colombo: Marga Institute, Series on A History of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, 2001, Nos. 20 & 21 respectively, 2001 [2003 in fact].

<sup>23</sup> Note a recent report from a foreign journalist who traveled to the administrative centre of the LTTE and was able to speak to ordinary folk without any minders: the general attitude was a feisty expectation of war in determined spirit. Likewise in Colombo even lady socialites were convinced that war was the only path (Mathew Rosenberg, "Sri Lanka seen heading back to civil war -- on an even larger scale," Associated Press report, Wed 2 May 2007). I encountered a similar fesity among English-speaking Tamils in the LTTE firmament in Kilinochchi in November 2004; but what ever war plans they had were severely dented by the tsunami of 26 December 2004.