
Sri Lanka's "Ethnic" Conflict in Its Literature in English

The situation is a nightmare. . . . There is my Western side that wants a solution and there is my Eastern side that doesn't expect a solution.¹

Michael Ondaatje

By D. C. R. A. GOONETILLEKE

The Western world is aware of what is termed the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, but I am not sure to what extent the facts are known, because the media emphasis is naturally on the sensational. Sri Lanka is a multiracial and multireligious nation. According to the most recent census, which was carried out in 1981, the population of Sri Lanka is over fifteen million, comprising 73.98 percent Sinhalese, 12.6 percent Tamils, 7.12 percent Moors, 5.56 percent Indian Tamils, 0.29 percent Malays, 0.26 percent Burghers (descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch), and 0.20 percent others. Of the Tamils, less than a half live in the North of Sri Lanka; the majority live among the Sinhalese. The Tamil minority enjoys a much better position in Sri Lanka than most minorities in other countries, and also, partly because of favored treatment ensuing from the classic colonial policy of "divide and rule" during a century and a half of British occupation, they became, in the words of Sri Lanka's leading historian, K. M. de Silva, "a minority with a majority complex."

After Independence (1948) the Sinhalese majority began to feel keenly that the balance should be righted, whereas the Tamil minority wanted their privileged position to continue. This led to occasional outbreaks of communal violence. The Tamils were aggrieved when Sinhalese was made the official language of Sri Lanka in 1956, though in practice they enjoyed the same language rights as the Sinhalese; the legal fiction was politically useful to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party to win the votes of the Sinhalese and score a landslide victory over the dominant United National Party in the general election of that year, but it had an unfortunate estranging effect on the Tamils. This was exploited by the Tamil United Liberation Front in the 1970s in opting for a

separate state for the Tamils, *Eelam* as it was called in Tamil; in the general election of 1977 the Tamils in the North and the East voted overwhelmingly for this party. The Eelam goal was a major threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country; this added to the resentment already felt by the Sinhalese, because the Tamils still held more than two or three times their ethnic proportion in the most important positions in public and private employment and because the charges of discrimination against the Tamils in education, employment opportunities, and development assistance to the North were unfounded. Although the Tamil United Liberation Front may have intended to use the demand for Eelam only as a bargaining device to secure a greater devolution of power, a chasm developed between the leaders of this party, who belonged to the older generation, and the Tamil youths, who adopted the Eelam cry with complete seriousness.² This led to the radicalization of Tamil politics, terrorism being employed as a legitimate means, Indian involvement, and international ramifications. The result is the present so-called ethnic crisis.

If one looks around the world—Cyprus, Canada, Belgium, Spain, Malaysia, Nigeria, India, Sri Lanka—it soon becomes clear that so-called ethnic tension and conflict is a common feature of our times and is often deeply built into the structure of these societies; people in Britain need look no further than Ulster in Ireland to see the phenomenon manifesting itself daily. Its real source and condition lies in the patterns of incorporation of diverse cultures, races, and classes in the hierarchies of power, opportunity, resources, and access to these.³ It is this core of structural tension that is crucial, and, strictly speaking, it is not ethnic as such; ethnicity provides only symbols for conflict.

Much of the world is unaware that there exists a sharp division of Sri Lanka into two sections not on grounds of religion or race or even of Sinhalese-speakers and Tamil-speakers. There are both Sinhalese and Tamils who are Christians. We have both Sinhalese and Tamils who embrace Islam, sometimes through conviction and sometimes frivolously in order to avail themselves of the convenience of a multiplicity of wives. Some Sinhalese, particularly those of Negombo on the West coast, speak Tamil as fluently

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