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Sri Lanka: racism and the politics of underdevelopment

There have been no race riots in Sri Lanka since independence. What there has been is a series of increasingly virulent pogroms against the Tamil people by the Sinhala state – resulting in the degeneracy of Sinhala society and its rapid descent into barbarism. And all this has been achieved in the name of Sinhala civilisation and Buddhist enlightenment – within a matter of thirty-five years – by the concerted efforts of politicians, priests and private armies.

Colonial capitalism and nationalism

When the British left Ceylon in 1948, the lines of communal conflict had already been drawn. One hundred and fifty years of British rule had brought together three different social formations under one central administration for purposes of economic exploitation; but for purposes of political control, the colonial government had reinforced the communal divisions that ran like a seam around those social formations. It divided in order to rule what it integrated in order to exploit. And it raised a class of administrators, suckled on English language and English culture, to reconcile the contradictions.

But then, the type of capitalism that developed in Sri Lanka under the British could neither destroy the pre-capitalist modes of production nor develop a coherent capitalist system in which the economic base

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would determine (in the final analysis, of course) the political and ideological superstructure. Instead, it had a differential impact on the different social formations and made capitalism's uneven development more uneven still. And what it could not cohere through organic capitalist development, it unified through administrative diktat. In the event, the social formations of the Kandyan highlands, the maritime provinces and the Northern peninsula,* which had for centuries co-existed side by side, now began to vie with each other for the favours of the colonial state – or, rather, the dominant classes within these social formations began to do so.

The character of that class differed with each social formation. In the Kandyan social formation, dominated by the feudal mode of production and untouched by foreign conquest till the advent of the British in 1815, the dominant class was the feudal aristocracy. In the coastal areas, and more particularly the western littoral, which had been subjected to almost 300 years of Portuguese commerce and Dutch mercantile capitalism, a merchant class with private property in land had emerged. The barren North, though similarly subjected to Portuguese (and then Dutch) rule from the early seventeenth century, was inhospitable to all colonial enterprise except missionary. The dominant mode, though tribute-paying, was not strictly feudal: the land was owned outright by the highest caste, the *vellala*, and not feudated of the king.¹ And the highest caste also happened to be the most numerous (unlike in India). Hence, the land-holdings were small and further fragmented by the dowry system.

The population of the Kandyan kingdom was predominantly Sinhala and Buddhist, though the king and the royal court were mostly Tamil. The maritime provinces had a mixture of 'races' – Arabs, Burghers,** Sinhalese, Tamils – and religions – Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu – but were largely Sinhalese and Buddhist. The Northern peninsula, though christianised by Portuguese and Dutch missions, remained predominantly Hindu – and Tamil. The caste system was more rigid here than in the other two social formations, but was ameliorated by the comparatively smaller numbers of the lower castes (in relation to the *vellalas*).

Into these social formations, colonial capitalism inserted the plantation 'mode' – as an enclave, within what was once the Kandyan kingdom, with its own imported, indentured, Indian Tamil labour force and a social order of its own, a colony within a colony – on common land on which the Sinhala peasants had once grazed their cattle, and on forest land which had freed them if need be from corvée labour

*These formed three separate kingdoms – the Kandyan, Kotte and Jaffna – at the time of the first European intrusion by the Portuguese in 1505.

**Descendants of mixed marriages between the Dutch and the Ceylonese.

through slash and burn cultivation. Waste lands, the British called them, without ownership or title, and, passing an Ordinance that decreed them property of the crown (1840), gave them away to the British planter at the upset price of five shillings per acre.² Already in 1818, whole villages had been alienated to the Kandyan nobility as reward for their help in quelling the peasant rebellion of the previous year – thereby altering a service and tribute-paying relationship into one of landlord and tenant. A landed aristocracy had been born and, with it, a landless peasantry. It was left to the Waste Lands Ordinance of 1897 to dispossess them completely, but, rather than drift into the semi-slave conditions of plantation work, they remained on the land as agricultural labour.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the plantation 'mode' had begun to dominate the economy, subsume all other modes to its own uses, build an infrastructure of railways and roads to take its produce to world markets, and develop a mighty business of sorting and selling, clearing and forwarding, insuring and shipping – and a species of local sucker capitalists to go with it. And to that species was added the dominant classes of earlier social formations to form the genus 'comprador'.

Some of these, particularly in the South, now owned their own little coconut, coffee and rubber plantations and graphite mines, either settled on them by grateful Dutch and British administrators or bought outright from the ill-gotten gains of the arrack industry. And they could afford to finish off their sons' education in Oxford and Cambridge and, later, the LSE, the better to enable them to take their place beside the colonialists in running the country.

However, it is also from this area of the country, the longest exposed to foreign influence and domination, that a proletariat emerges from the ranks of a long dispossessed peasantry – to work in the docks and the railways and the roads, in the engineering works and the construction industry. But it is still a proletariat with one foot in the land – or an eye to the land that its wages could buy back. Only the Tamil worker imported from South India to do the more laborious work in the ports and on the roads constituted the classical urban proletariat of capitalism.

The Tamil North was infertile, barren – no rivers, no forests, no mountains – nothing grew there except children. But if it was inhospitable to colonial enterprise, it was inviting of missionary zeal and education. The first was to close down its economic options, the second to open them up in the service of the Raj.* The industry of a people who had worked an ungiving land was now given over to education, and the government service, into which education could take

*Tamils served the British in Malaya, Singapore etc.

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them. Education was land. And so the *vellalas* sent their sons to school and into the colonial service and the professions – and those who did well rose in prestige and position and came to own land and property, in Colombo and other parts of the country where their services took them. They soon came to be known as the ‘Colombo Tamils’ and were to take their place beside their English-educated Sinhala counterparts in their common quest for political office.

Below them was another tier of government service, Tamils who had probably made it to 7th standard English or even the Junior Cambridge (failed) – and it was they who did the clerical work, the lesser accounts (later, of course, to become cashiers and *shroffs** in the *kachcheries*** and banks) or went about helping the British to open up railway stations and post offices in the malaria-infested interior. Forced to leave their families at home in Jaffna, they became a rootless migrant labour force with only their religion and their language and their culture to hold on to.

For the vast majority of the people in Jaffna Province, however, and especially for the low caste folk, very little had changed. The *vellalas* still owned the fragmented land and the lower castes worked for them for a pittance.

If the ruling classes of the old formations and the rising new bourgeoisie of the plantation economy were beginning to find their comprador niche in the colonial order – though not without combat – and therein discover a common purpose, there was little to unite the various sections of the working class. The plantation workers were segregated in a bantustan and separated by language, caste and creed – and, above all, the labour process – from the Sinhala peasantry around them and from the rest of the working class. Only on the docks and the railways and the roads did the Indian labourer work side by side with Sinhala labour. And as for the native Tamil labourer, he was virtually non-existent outside the Jaffna peninsula and the Eastern Province. The most frequent contact that the Sinhala worker had with the indigenous Tamil was in the latter’s capacity as small shopkeeper or lesser bureaucrat. Only among the lower-middle class clerical workers was there a shared work experience among Sinhalese and Tamils – but their unity suffered from the handicaps of their class.

Neither a national bourgeoisie, then, nor a fully-fledged proletariat and only the most venal of petit-bourgeoisies – ‘small landowners, artisans, craftsmen, small petty producers mainly rural-based... educated in the indigenous languages ...’ and ‘a new group (mainly urban) of clerks, minor bureaucrats, shopkeepers and teachers generated by the needs of the plantation economy’³ – that was the class character

*Chief cashiers.

**Town halls.

of Sri Lanka at the turn of the century, with the British plantocracy at the top and Indian merchant capitalists a tier below.

Colonial capitalism had bred neither a capitalist class that out of sheer economic compulsion was dying to break its colonial integument nor a proletariat that could see beyond race and religion to its own class interests. Power for the colonial bourgeoisie and the colonial proletariat lay not in economic hegemony or in class struggle, but in the trappings and appurtenances of the colonial state on the one hand and its hand-outs and favours on the other. The 'bourgeoisie' vied for a place in the colonial sun, the 'proletariat' for a place in bourgeois patronage. The path to economic power was through political power politics was not, as in central capitalism, the handmaiden of economics and political power was in the hands of the colonial state. State power was all.

For a moment, though, the nationalist and working-class agitations of the first quarter of the twentieth century looked as though they might take off into anti-colonial struggle. Elements of such a movement had already emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century in the form of a broad-based religious revival - Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim - aimed at contesting Christian privilege and Christian culture. Led by the middle-class intelligentsia, it had found its immediate expression in a rash of anti-Christian publications, followed by the founding of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim schools, and ending up in the pioneering strike of the printing workers in 1893, during which arose (and fell) the first trade union: that of the printers.* The reactionary excesses of this revival, however, had also resulted in the first religious riot - between Catholics and Buddhists in the north of Colombo.

It was this same spirit of religious revivalism that fired the bourgeois-led temperance movement of 1903-05 and, raging through the South in demonstrations, processions, publications, associations, singed the beard of government. More, it pointed the way to rebellion among ordinary working-class people and set the mood for the carters' strike of 1906.** The strike was remarkable in that it had all communities and creeds in its ranks and won the unstinting support of all the working people of Colombo, who egged the carters on to greater defiance of the police. And this in turn encouraged the temperance movement to spread itself further into the working population and the rural masses and become more self-consciously political. But the

* Much of the information in this section is owed to Kumari Jayawardena's seminal and path-breaking work on the labour movement in Ceylon.⁴

** Bullock carts were essential for transporting plantation produce and exports and imports to and from Colombo harbour.

constitutional reform of 1910 confined the franchise to the western-educated elite and continued to keep the rising new bourgeoisie from power, precipitating its involvement in the railway strike of 1912. Though the strike itself was 'secular', relating to the cost of living and wages of railway workers, and included workers of all creeds and communities, the Sinhala strikers were not unaffected by the anti-Indian outpourings in the Sinhala press and the strident nationalism of the more aggressive leaders like Dharmapala, who now inveighed against Moors and Tamils (in addition to Europeans) as 'infidels of a degraded race'. Consequently, when the strike was bought off with a Commission and the Commission itself failed to grant any of the workers' demands, whether about pay, conditions of work, promotion or the use of Indian labour in preference to Sinhala, the workers' simmering frustration and anger, made worse by the shortages of the 1914-18 war, burst out in physical violence against Moor traders and money-lenders. Anti-Muslim riots had already broken out in Kandy over a religious dispute the previous day and the railway workers in Colombo now found common cause with them.

The riots spread and the government, which had espoused the cause of the Muslims, over-reacted, fearing that the whole thing was a Sinhala-German plot. Martial law was declared on 2 June 1915 and every white man, civilian and military, given permission to shoot and kill at will.* Punjabi soldiers, mostly Muslim, were brought in to maintain law and order and the courts martial sentenced over fifty people to summary execution. Temperance leaders (even the most moderate, like D.S. Senanayake, the future prime minister) were imprisoned and railway workers who had revealed themselves as militants at the hearings of the Railway Commission exiled to the Eastern Province.

The bourgeois nationalist 'revolution' was dead - it had died of its own religious and communal contradictions: its inability to turn a religious crusade into a (secular) political campaign embracing all sects and/or a working-class movement embracing all races. The cultural resistance of the Sinhala-Buddhists, in other words, did not - precisely because it was Sinhala and Buddhist - 'take on', as Cabral has it, 'new forms (political, economic, armed) in order fully to contest foreign domination'. And it remained confined to Sinhala-Buddhism precisely because the 'bourgeoisie' that colonial capitalism created had vision of neither nation nor class.

This applied to the Tamil 'bourgeoisie' too who, raised on western education and western values, found a sinecure in government office and were loth to rock the colonial boat. There was the odd exception,

* By a subsequent Act of Indemnity the 'shooters' were placed beyond the reach of the law.

though, like Arunachalam who even as Registrar-General took up the cause of his people, Sinhalese and Tamii, Buddhist and Hindu, urban worker and estate labourer -- and was to found not only the Ceylon National Congress as a vehicle for nationalist politics but a plethora of welfare organisations to serve the interests of the masses.* And for a while it looked as though, at the level of political bargaining with the colonial government at least, the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisies could come together -- they had earlier 'elected' the Tamil Ramanathan to the 'educated seat' in the Legislative Council and he in turn championed the Sinhala cause in the riots of 1915.** But Governor Manning, who had formerly handled the Mahdi uprising in the Sudan and other such threats to British power, found even such a fragile unity of the western-educated elite threatening to him and his government's position and set out to play the communal game.*** And the lick-spittle bourgeoisie took to it as to the manner born. Soon they were reviving their feudal feuds -- with the effete up-country aristocracy demanding self-determination for the 'Kandyan race', the Tamils holding up their better (western) education and their faithful government service for preferential treatment, and the low-country Sinhalese shrewdly building up their communal base among the rural elite of native physicians, village schoolmasters and Buddhist monks through Mahajana Sabhas (Peoples' Associations) cobbled together from the now defunct temperance organisations. (They were subsequently to provide the basis for Bandaranaike's Sinhala Maha Sabha and mark out his communal constituency.) †

But if the bourgeoisie had shot its radical bolt and settled for constitutional plea-bargaining through lobbies such as the Ceylon National Congress, the working-class movement benefited by the religious-nationalist demise to become more secularly working-class. And the fact that the reformists now sought their support in the rural elite and not among the urban workers left the latter free to pursue their own class interests. Hence, in the railway and dock strikes of 1920, the workers relied on their own resources and self-organisation to take on the employers and win.†† And it was the self-assurance of the working class that determined the militancy of its subsequent

* Arunachalam left Congress and politics when, after 1920, Congress moderates were inveigled into participating in the Legislative Council.

** Sinhala communalism at this time was directed against the Indian Tamils and not the 'indigenous'.

*** The Ceylonese 'seats' in the Legislative Council were directly apportioned on a communal basis and Governor Manning sought to reinforce this in perpetuity. 'In such a community as this', he wrote to the Colonial Office, 'there is naturally plenty of racial strife and jealousy and that will be of value in deciding the composition of the Council.'⁵

† The Tamil response to the Mahajana Sabhas was the Mahajana Sabhais!

†† The Ceylon Workers Welfare League, which was founded by Arunachalam and

leadership in the Ceylon Labour Union and A.E. Goonesinha and characterised the general strike of 1923 and the rash of strikes between 1927 and 1929 – creating in the process an urban working class united across caste and creed and community. More importantly, it was this working-class tail that now began to wag the nationalist dog and pitch Goonesinha (in his political persona) and his Young Lanka League into the more militant politics of *swaraj*. In this they were influenced by the nationalist movement in India – and that in turn augured well for the continuing unity between the urban proletariat and the plantation workers. Though Goonesinha himself had made no attempt to extend his trade union activities to the plantations, he was unstinting in his support of the struggles conducted first by Arunachalam (between 1913 and 1922) and then by Natesa Iyer, Indian member of the Legislative Council, to improve the wages and conditions of Indian estate labour. Natesa Iyer, in fact, was Goonesinha's lieutenant in the dock strike of 1927 and had prevailed upon blackleg labour imported from India to return home – and before that they had jointly edited a paper that was uncompromising in its demand for *swaraj*.

But Goonesinha was also influenced by the British trade union movement and the way it articulated with the parliamentary politics of the British Labour Party and, on his return from the Commonwealth Labour Conference in London in 1928, founded the Ceylon Labour Party and the All-Ceylon Trades Union Congress. This was also the time that the Donoughmore Commission on constitutional reform, appointed by Colonial Secretary Lord Passfield (Sydney Webb), was advocating adult suffrage for Ceylon, despite the strident protests of the Ceylon National Congress – and Goonesinha saw the enfranchisement of the working class as his and, therefore their path to power. He was, after all, the leader of both the trade union movement and the Labour Party, and no doubt his political interest could only serve the workers' economic interest. When, therefore, a deepening recession put the Sinhala urban workers at loggerheads with their Indian fellows, it was not working-class solidarity that claimed Goonesinha's attention but the need to win over the Sinhala majority to his 'parliamentary' cause. He did not, in other words, help the workers to close ranks against the colonial employer as a national labour leader should have; instead, he used their Sinhala chauvinism to gain a ready-made electoral majority. And in his paper, *Viraya* (Hero!), he returned to the virulent communalism of the bourgeois nationalists before him and reinforced further the prejudices of the Sinhala working class. In 1931, he was elected to the solidly Sinhala seat of Colombo Central – and trade unions passed into the keeping of political parties.

his Social Service League in 1919, and later blossomed into the Ceylon Workers' Federation, never took off into true unionism.

The second nationalist 'revolution', based in the working class, was dead also.* It had died, like its bourgeois counterpart, of its own communal contradictions. But, unlike the latter, those contradictions had been fomented by a leadership that saw in adult suffrage and territorial representation the built-in advantages of communalism. Equally, the minorities – and in particular the largest and most influential minority, the Tamils – were afraid that they would lose out on the privileges that the divisive politics of colonialism had awarded them beyond their electoral weight. The Kandyan nobility by now had merged its waning fortunes with the up and coming low-country Sinhala entrepreneur-politico and was more anxious about what it would lose through the enfranchisement of the plantation worker than about what it would gain by retaining its (nominated) communal seat in Council. But the signs were that a future Sinhala government would neuter the Indian vote.

The Donoughmore Commissioners had set their faces sternly against Manning's communal scheme of representation in the expectation that territorial electorates had a better chance of engendering a non-communal party system. But they had reckoned without the client bourgeoisie, to whom they must have been really alluding when they wrote that 'the conception of patriotism in Ceylon is as much racial as national'.⁷ In the event, the Constitution of 1931 – after a brief spasm of Sinhala-Tamil collaboration in the western reaches of the first State Council where Oxford and Cambridge vied only for debating honours – finally sealed up the communal lines of government that had been fostered by the British for over a century.** So that even when the semblance of a non-communal party system began to emerge with the founding of the LSSP in 1933, it was set in the matrix of bourgeois parliamentary politics (its leaders were from that class anyway) and destined, therefore, to end up in communalism albeit some twenty-five years later. By the time the Soulbury Commission, in the wake of the war and India's successful independence struggle, came to serve up self-government to Ceylon on an Indian platter, an entrenched pan-Sinhala ministry in the last State Council had pointed the way to political, and hence economic, domination.*** All that was needed

* Two more flutters of anti-colonial nationalism were to follow – the first, in 1931, when the Jaffna Youth Congress called for a boycott of the State Council elections because the Donoughmore Constitution had not awarded *swaraj*, and the second, in the years following, when anti-Poppy Day protests (the Surya Mal campaign) threatened to burgeon into a fully-fledged anti-British movement under the auspices of the newly-formed (marxist) Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). But the first, remarkable though it was for its anti-caste, anti-communal stance, never got beyond the peninsula and the second got two of its leaders into the State Council ere hardly a shot was fired.⁶

** Representations right up to the 1920s had been on a communal basis and by nomination of the Governor.

*** The minorities led by G.G. Ponnambalam and his Tamil Congress had demanded a

was a racist ideology to substantiate the one and facilitate the other – and that would be found through communalism.

Colonial capitalism had failed capitalism's first precept – to put economics in command. Instead, it had overlaid the economies of existing social formations to one degree or another with a plantation economy and held them down with a strong state and a mimic culture. What little capitalism escaped through the interstices of a metropolitan-oriented economy was invariably merchant capitalism. And merchant capital's path to power is through patronage. It has not the self-assurance, the audacity of industrial capital, to fashion its own political hegemony – or its style to fashion the culture that furnishes its *raison d'être*.

Everything about colonial capitalism is disorganic, fissiparous, uncreative. It articulates nothing. Even its contradictions do not allow of growth; they congeal instead into paradoxes, holding two dissimilar truths together – a mirage of progress and equally invidious.

Colonial capitalism creates nothing and destroys nothing.* Instead, it distorts, disfigures, disorientates. It develops the productive forces only to stifle them in the service of the 'mother country'. It engenders new social relations and social classes only to suspend them between the past and the future: the bourgeois temperament remains feudal, the proletarian mind unreleased from the land. It creates a hybrid culture only to frustrate its finest flowering. It promotes liberal democracy only to pave the way to dictatorship. Colonial capitalism aborts capitalist development and leaves the dead foetus in the womb of the past.

From nationalism to communalism

The first act of an independent Ceylonese government under D.S. Senanayake and his United National Party (UNP) was to render plantation workers stateless on the ground that they could not provide legally valid documentation to show that they were citizens of Ceylon by registration or descent. The second (virtually) was to disfranchise them – on the ground that they were not Ceylon nationals! At one

combined territorial and communal representation which could effect a 50/50 balance between the Sinhalese and the rest, but the Soulbury Commission could not go back on the Donoughmore Constitution and universal franchise.

* India, though cited as the archetypal example of the opposite view that capitalism in a colony is, in the final analysis, creative (or creative-destructive) was really the exception. India's burgeoning capitalism and its capitalist class were *suppressed* by the British. And it was the nationalist struggle of this suppressed Indian bourgeoisie – to whose assistance Gandhi's feudal genius brought the masses, armed with non-violence and the *charkha* that was the backbone of the independence movement. This is also why bourgeois democracy took natural root in India and not in Ceylon or any other British colony.

parliamentary stroke (more or less), the bourgeoisie had removed a tenth of the population and the whole of the plantation proletariat from effective participation in their and their country's affairs. Constituencies in which the plantation workers once had enough electoral clout to return their own representatives – or tilt the balance in favour of a workers' party like the LSSP* – now became rotten boroughs for one rotten section of the bourgeoisie or another. Whole constituencies in the hill country were denuded of voters – Talawakelle, for example, dropping from 19,298 to 2,912 – giving an extraordinary weightage to the Sinhala rural voter who, guided in his communal prejudices by the sanction of the law and the benefits of patronage, was, in Ludowyk's telling phrase, 'on his way to becoming the centre of gravity in the political world of Ceylon'.⁹

The Sinhala bourgeoisie was finding its political kingdom through the uses of communalism – and it was a measure of the degeneracy of the Tamil bourgeoisie as represented in G.G. Ponnambalam's Tamil Congress that it was prepared to betray the Indian Tamils to stay in power.** But its turn was still to come.

The portents were already there – in 1949 – when the government inaugurated an irrigation scheme in a predominantly Tamil area of the Eastern Province to settle Sinhala colonists. The idea ostensibly was to provide land for the landless Sinhala peasantry – but in the event, those chosen were the nominees of politicians in search of sure seats. State aid made that assurance doubly sure – the settler was both landowner and state-aided cultivator – and he, together with the casual labourer who his patron had already recruited to the irrigation schemes, would have the run of the settlement. They would 'take care of business', turn into a private army if need be. Their allegiance was to their political patron, the patron's to the governing party, the party's to its (Sinhala) majority. Whether or not colonisation schemes helped the landless Sinhala peasant, they certainly altered the communal composition of constituencies so as to give the Sinhalese a majority. The Tamils were out-voted before they had even begun.

Bandaranaike read the electoral signs early on – and in 1951 left the UNP to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) from the nucleus of his Sinhala Maha Sabha. He was a son and a nephew removed from the UNP line to the throne, anyway, and now was as good a time as any to make his populist move. As Minister for Local Government (1936-51) and through his work with the Mahajana Sabhas of the temperance era – from which his Sinhala Maha Sabha had sprung – he had found the

* The LSSP's All Ceylon Estate Workers' Union had supported the plantation workers in their struggles and led the historic strikes on Mooloya and Wewessa estates in the 1930s.⁸

** There were two exceptions though: S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and C. Vanniansingham, who broke away from the Tamil Congress (TC) to form the Federal Party (FP).

pulse if not of the Sinhala masses, at least of their traditional leaders: the monk, the physician and the teacher - and in their future he saw his own.

But though Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake died the following year, Bandaranaike had to wait till 1956 - till, that is the old man's son and nephew had their whack at government - before he and his SLFP could make a serious bid for power. 1956 also happened to be the year of the Buddha Jayanti (the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's death), said to commemorate the 'unique three-fold event' of the founding of Buddhism, the settlement of Ceylon and the origins of the Sinhala people. And Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike was not loth to present himself as champion of Sinhala-Buddhism: the triangular relationship between King, the *Sangha* (the clergy) and the people of the ancient polity could not have been far from his mind. Sinhala, he declared, abandoning his previous stand for *swabasha* (use of both the vernacular languages), would be the official language and Buddhism the state religion. But the UNP had also latched on to the communalist game and in the Dutch auction that followed, Bandaranaike committed his party to making Sinhala the official language within twenty-four hours of being elected. Even so, the coalition the SLFP had concocted could not have defeated the UNP so decisively but for the agreement of the marxist parties not to contest the same seats* (on the ground that if the SLFP was not quite socialist, the UNP was certainly capitalist). One breakaway faction of the international marxists in fact joined the SLFP coalition to form the future government (on the ground, one suspects, that it was all right to be nationalist at home, so long as you were internationalist abroad). That this faction was led by Philip Gunawardena, the father of international marxism (in Ceylon that is), served only to show the way to future Trotskyite strategy.

The first act of the 'people's government' was to take away the language rights of a fifth of the people - with a bill that decreed that Sinhala was to replace English as the sole official language of the country. The philosophy behind the Official Language Act was to give the common man and woman a voice in their country's affairs. It was intolerable that only the 5 per cent (both Sinhalese and Tamil) who spoke English should have the running of the government or reap the benefits of office - and it was absurd that 95 per cent of the population should conduct their official dealings through interpreters who translated their native tongues back into a foreign language in order to

* The LSSP and the Communist Party (CP) stood for parity of language, but in their anxiety to be left (class-wise), they ended up by being right (race-wise). But, for all that, they were the only parties to put up Tamil candidates at all. The electorates were beginning to be communalised.

be (officially) understood. But it was equally intolerable – and unjust – that the Act, in giving voice to the Sinhala masses, should have shut out that of the Tamils. (The LSSP and CP, having avoided the language issue at the election, fought valiantly now for parity – but who was going to believe them?)

In protest, the Federal Party staged a Gandhian *satyagraha* opposite the Houses of Parliament – and a Sinhala mob egged on by Bandaranaike's coalition partners beat them up. The violence spread to other parts of Colombo and sparked off a conflagration in Gal Oya Valley in which over 150 Tamils were killed by Sinhala 'settlers'. It was no longer the Tamil vote or Tamil land that was endangered by colonisation schemes, but Tamil lives.

At its convention a few months later, the Federal Party, to which more and more Tamils had been driven by Sinhala separatism, called for a federal constitution, equal status for Tamil as an official language, the repeal of the citizenship laws and an end to the colonisation of Tamil areas. If the government did not meet its conditions within a year, it threatened mass civil disobedience.

In July 1957, the Prime Minister conceded the justice of the Tamil case and entered into a pact with Chelvanayakam, the Federal Party leader, to provide legislation that would grant regional autonomy, recognise Tamil as 'the language of administration of the Northern and Eastern Provinces', and end Sinhala colonisation of Tamil areas. But no sooner was the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact concluded than the communalist forces that Bandaranaike himself had nurtured began a violent campaign against it. Only this time, they were led by the UNP Shadow Minister of Finance, J.R. Jayewardene, who headed a 'pilgrimage' of *bhikkus* (monks) and thugs to the Tooth Temple in Kandy to save the Sinhala-Buddhist polity – and was way-laid by an opposing gang of thugs some miles from Colombo.*

The goondas had been given their head. It only needed government sanction before they cut loose. And that came when, in retaliation for the obliteration of Sinhala number plates on state-owned buses in the North, the goondas in Colombo were allowed by an unseeing police to deface Tamil businesses and homes and harass Tamil passers-by. Their depredations spread to other parts of the country, sanctioned now by priests and political bosses. It was all '*apey anduwa*' (our government) now.

The Prime Minister prevaricated over the promised legislation, the UNP protesting against the division of the country pushed division

* This was led by another Bandaranayake (MP) who, after various sojourns in various parties of various hues, was to end up an intrepid communalist (irrespective of party). It was a journey that was to be traversed by a whole host of MPs, both left and right, according to the vicissitudes of the parliamentary game.

further, the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna (United Front of Monks) threatened non-violence if the pact was not abrogated. On the morning of 9 April (1958), 200 *bhikkus* and hundreds more of their assorted cohorts laid siege to the Prime Minister's residence. By afternoon he capitulated: the Pact was revoked.

The *bhikkus* had arrived on the political stage, with the goon squads in close attendance. There was very little to choose between them anyway. The days when the *Sangha* had stood for learning and scholarship had faded under the impact of colonial neglect and christian endeavour. The *pirivennas* (universities) which turned out educated priests and princes alike had fallen into desuetude. The secular learning that was a necessary part of a *samanera*'s (novice's) apprenticeship had become secondary to ritual – and the preaching of *banna* and the recital of the *gatha* in Pali, a language as dead as Latin, reified ritual. And the *samanera* himself came to be seen as a necessary aid to clerical celibacy. The Buddhist *bhikku* of the classical era, sworn to abstinence and poverty, freed of greed, had, with rare exception, been succeeded by worldly monks who used their traditional position (restored to them by Bandaranaike) to become wielders of patronage and purveyors of power. Some of them were rich and powerful in their own right – and the prince of them all was the incumbent of the ancient temple of Kelaniya Buddharakkita Thero, whose taste in liquor and women was legend throughout the land. Even the Catholic church at its most corrupt could scarcely have done better – except that it was then at the end of its power; the Buddhist clergy was at the (second) beginning of theirs.

Every move that Bandaranaike now made to make amends for his betrayal of the Pact – such as a bill on the reasonable use of Tamil – was blocked by priests and politicians and the Sinhala press and the mass hysteria they whipped up in the country. The Sinhala language, they warned, was in danger of extinction – and with it the Sinhala people. Where else in the world was Sinhala spoken but in Ceylon? The Tamils at least could look across the Palk Strait to the 40 million Tamils in Tamil Nadu for the preservation of their language and culture.* Their allegiance, in any case, was not to Lanka but India. Ceylon was for the Sinhalese – and Sinhala should prevail over every other language 'from Point Pedro to Dondra Head'.

The marxist parties were no help to Bandaranaike either. They were more intent on 'embarrassing the government' with strikes than on

* 'Danger of South Indian domination was the product of Sinhalese fears of Tamil reactions to the suppression of their language by a Sinhala-only policy.'¹⁰ Ludowyk was writing in 1966, but the attitude of the Sri Lanka government to India after the pogroms of 1983 vindicates his analysis – except that, since then, 'Sinhalese fears' have been honed into a fine ideology of 'Indian expansionism'.

helping it to find a solution to the language question – apart from reiterating their ‘principled stand’ for parity in parliament. But all they discovered in the course of the strikes was that they were losing their troops to communalism.

The country was fast dividing into two separate communities. Even the veneer of class politics that had, at independence, separated the right (the UNP) from the left (LSSP/CP) was beginning to wear thin under the impact of SLFP communalism – not that communalism mattered per se (as yet) but it was a sure passport to power. What was learnt from the disfranchisement of the Indian Tamils could be put to use to emasculate the ‘native Tamils’. But Bandaranaike’s ride to power on the back of communal politics, and his inability to climb off once he got there, proved that communalism was a one-way ticket to communalism. That had not deterred either the right or the left, though, from being pulled, in varying degrees and at varying pace, into the ‘middle-path’ of Sinhala-Buddhism. The pampered Tamil middle class, having first played along with the Sinhala bourgeoisie, had been forced into fighting Sinhala communalism with Tamil communalism (albeit non-violently).

The ‘marxist’ parties, having thrown themselves whole-heartedly into parliamentary politics from their inception – the leader of the Opposition, Dr N.M. Perera, was also leader of the LSSP – were incapable of fighting the vital issues of class and race outside parliament without having an eye to the vote at the same time. When they failed to defeat the bill disfranchising the plantation workers in the House, they neither brought out their unions in support of their fellow workers nor continued to further the Indian workers’ cause in the country at large. Similarly, they were prepared to fight Bandaranaike’s ‘Sinhala only’ bill in parliament (having first put him there) but failed to fight it outside, either with their trade union power or with their not inconsiderable support among the Sinhala and Tamil intelligentsia. The only extra-parliamentary struggle they had waged was in the *hartal* of 1953, when they ‘led’ the spontaneous uprisings of the masses against rising food prices and the cessation of rice subsidies. But though the government fled to the safety of a ship in harbour, from where to conduct its affairs, the ‘marxists’ turned tail at the last moment and left the workers stranded. Now, against the rising tide of communalism, all they could do was to advance the cause of parity in a bourgeois parliament or retreat to the comfort of marxist dogma and dismiss communalism as a capitalist red herring spoiling the spoor of class struggle.

There was no one to speak up for the Tamils except the Tamils. And no Tamil party spoke to their interest like the Federal Party. But the Federalists had failed to deliver on the B-C Pact. It was imperative, therefore, that their convention in May 1958 should resurrect the

strategy of mass disobedience, the threat of which had brought Bandaranaike to the negotiating table in the first place.

But as they set out for the convention in Vavuniya in the Northern Province, the goon squads, under instructions from their political bosses, were getting ready to way-lay them at Polonnaruwa. Their instructions at this stage, according to Tarzie Vittachi's painfully objective report of the events, were to 'stone buses and trains, hoot and generally signify "disapprobation"'.¹¹ But this was the same assortment of casual labourers and squatters from the irrigation and land development schemes in Polonnaruwa area who, a year earlier, had driven Tamil workers from the land allotted to them under a compensation scheme. They had called themselves the Sinhala Hamudawa then (the Sinhala army), and, led by a monk, had set out to stem a Tamil 'invasion' of their traditional homelands. Another invading horde of Tamils, it was now put about, was converging from Trincomalee and Batticaloa on the ancient capital of Polonnaruwa - and the Sinhala Hamudawa girded for battle, derailing and smashing up trains in the hunt for Tamils. And when that yielded little, they rampaged through the town 'raping, looting and beating up Tamil labourers and officers'. In the days following, the atrocities began to mount in number and intensity and spread rapidly to other parts of the country. In Batticaloa, Tamil fishermen retaliated by burning the huts of their Sinhalese fellows and driving them out into a hostile sea. In Colombo and the South, Tamil businesses and properties were looted and set on fire - and Tamil passengers in cars and buses, identified by their inability to read Sinhala or recite a Buddhist *gatha* (hymn), taken out and murdered. In Ratmalana, opposite the bus terminal, a game of Tamil-burning had developed, where one man would chase the victim with a can of petrol and douse him, while another flicked a lighted match at him. And yet the government said and did nothing.

When the Prime Minister finally came on the radio - four days after the 'riots' began - ostensibly to heal the communal breach, he pointed to the unexplained death of a Sinhala businessman and ex-mayor (of Nuwara Eliya) in the Tamil District of Batticaloa on the 25th May as the cause of 'the various acts of violence and lawlessness' that had begun on the 22nd! The death of one Sinhalese man seemed to weigh more heavily on the Prime Minister's conscience than the hundreds of Tamils burnt, mutilated, raped and hacked to death. Only the previous night, Tamil labourers and their families on the government farms at Polonnaruwa and Hingurakgoda had been simultaneously massacred. At Polonnaruwa, they had fled into the sugar-cane bushes of their own planting, only to be burnt out of hiding and bludgeoned to death. At Hingurakgoda, forty families were systematically slaughtered. Only the initiative, courage and innate humanity of the government agent of the District and his police officers and constables

(all Sinhala) prevented the spread of mass murder. No such roll-call of honour was conceivable twenty-five years later.

The Prime Minister's broadcast served only to incense the Sinhalese further and trigger off a spate of rumours about Tamil atrocities – which in turn justified the killing of more Tamils. Finally, on 27 May, the Governor-General, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, declared a State of Emergency and brought out the troops.* The riots continued in parts of Colombo despite the curfew and reached Jaffna the following day – when reports of an attack on a Hindu temple in the South and the burning of its priest led to a revenge attack on a Buddhist temple in Jaffna town and the vandalism, the following day, of a resplendent Buddhist shrine on the offshore island of Nainativu. 'No attempt was made to do bodily harm to the Sinhalese', comments Vittachi. But 'they were told to leave their homes and their shops ... and then their goods were dragged out on to the road and heaped up and burnt.' That, at least, the 'local leaders' felt was owed to 'their brothers and sisters in the South.'¹³

And there were 12,000 of them in the refugee camps in Colombo alone, who were eventually sent off to Jaffna by ship, because the roads and railways were still unsafe. And that led a racist Sinhala MP to make the unintentional prophecy that it was the government that was dividing the country by sending the Tamils back to the North and East. But the government put it all down to a Muscovite plot – and placed the Tamil leaders in detention.

With the Emergency to keep Sinhala mobs at bay and detention to keep Federalists out of Tamil reach, Bandaranaike returned to his 'middle-path' and brought in an Act which gave him, as Prime Minister, the right to effect regulations for the reasonable use of Tamil – and then proceeded to do nothing. A year later, he was shot dead by a *bhikku* – at the instigation of the Rev Buddharakkita Thero, the sybarite high priest of the Kelaniya temple and secretary of the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna.

From communalism to racism

Communalism had grown out of a soured nationalism which, having failed to wrest power from the British through an anti-colonial struggle uniting the various communities, turned them (the communities) to wresting it from each other when it was thrown to them like a bone. The trappings of bourgeois democracy had decreed that that power should reside in the majority. Such a majority was already waiting in the wings. All it needed was the sanction of government and the

* 'The Prime Minister had decided to allow the Governor-General to take the spotlight so that he could also take the rap.'¹²

blessing of religion to define it as Sinhala and Buddhist. And those it had found by 1958. What Sinhala communalism was still to find, though, before it took on the dimensions of racism, was its institutionalisation in the apparatuses – legislative, executive and judicial – of the state. And that was to come in the ‘reign’ of the two SLFP governments, 1960-65 and 1970-77, and more particularly in the second, which was a coalition of the SLFP, LSSP and CP known as the United Front. But in between, both the UNP and the SLFP (and its allies), depending on which party was in opposition at the time kept up a barrage of Sinhala-Buddhist propaganda to bring down the other’s government, and ‘communalised’ the electorate in the process.

The response of the Federal Party (and the tainted Tamil Congress) to the growing state racism – right up to 1972 when a new constitution put paid to their middle-class hopes of being accommodated as equals within a Sinhala polity – was to run from one party to another with parliamentary power deals, ‘committing’ *satyagraha* when repulsed.

In March 1960, the Federal Party tried to make a deal with a hung UNP government to keep it in power, but the FP’s demands were too close to the B-C Pact for UNP comfort. The FP then hawked its fifteen MPs to the SLFP, to bring down the UNP government, for the same price, and was accepted. But when the SLFP was returned to office in the July election with a big enough majority to form its own government, it reneged on its agreement with the FP. At that point, the FP went into *satyagraha* – which on this occasion was widespread enough to paralyse the administration in the Tamil districts. The government sent in the troops and, when the FP retaliated with its own postal service and stamps, subjected Jaffna to its first reign of army brutality.

The parliamentary power game was over, certainly as far as the SLFP was concerned. The UNP, runners-up as always in the communal stakes, might still need to make overtures to the FP to form a government, but the SLFP had drawn the LSSP and CP closer to its bosom with its mock socialist policies. Bandaranaike had already nationalised transport and the handling of cargo in the docks. His widow took over petrol stations, mission schools, one bank (the Bank of Ceylon) and insurance. This, and the offer of three ministries in her cabinet (albeit in the dying days of her government), endeared her to the revolutionary marxists of the LSSP who promptly abandoned ‘parity’ for power. (The CP, even without the blandishments of power, had given up its ‘principled stand’ on parity of status for the two languages two years earlier, in 1962.)

Virtually the first act of the SLFP/LSSP coalition was to formulate a plan to repatriate the (disfranchised) plantation workers. For sixteen years they had remained stateless and voteless, but so long as India had refused to have them ‘back’, they could at least stay on in the

country of their birth. But now a tidy agreement had been planned between the two governments (in the 'Sirimavo-Shastri Pact') to repatriate the many by giving citizenship to the few.* And the 'marxists', who had once found their way to State Council and parliament through the votes of the plantation workers, were now a party to their evacuation. The LSSP even agreed to Mrs Bandaranaike putting them, when citizenised (plus those who were already citizens), on a separate (communal) electoral register.** If Mrs Bandaranaike could not get the urban working class on her side, she could at least get its leaders to do her bidding.

It was little wonder, then, that when the next government – a UNP concoction of several parties including the FP, the TC and Philip Gunawardene (ex-marxist, ex-SLFP minister) – announced the introduction of regulations for 'the reasonable use of Tamil', based on Bandaranaike's Tamil Language Act of 1958, the SLFP should get its new-found partners, the LSSP and CP, to join its viciously communal anti-government demonstrations by bringing out their unions on strike.

The communalisation of the Sinhala working class was well-nigh complete. A few unions still remained untainted by the communal leadership of the marxist left – such as the Ceylon Mercantile Union under Bala Tampoe and those within the Ceylon Trade Union Federation under Sanmugathasan. But they were both Tamils and, though politically active in their different parties, were careful not to intrude 'the national question' into trade union politics.*** All that remained now was for the LSSP and CP to help formulate policies that would be repressive of the Tamil people and of the working class alike. And that was to come with their ascent to power with the SLFP in the United Front (UF) government of 1970-77.

But by now, the economy was in a sorry mess. Successive governments had squandered whatever sterling assets had accrued to them during the war years. Foreign exchange earnings from tea, rubber and coconut, which constituted 90 per cent of the country's exports, had fallen with the fall in world prices. Two-thirds of those earnings went

* Under this agreement, 525,000 plantation workers were to be repatriated to India and 300,000 given Ceylonese citizenship over a period of fifteen years.

** As a consequence, the Ceylon Workers Congress, the most powerful trade union among the plantation workers, led by S. Thondaman, went over to the UNP for the first time since 1947, and a UNP government repudiated the policy of a special register a couple of years later.

*** Sanmugathasan, in fact, had remained in the CP when the party betrayed its stand on parity (1962) – and it was only over the Sino-Soviet rift in 1963 that he broke away to form the pro-Chinese Ceylon Communist Party (CCP), taking the CTUF with him. And at that point, the CP mounted a scurrilous communal campaign against him to woo back the rank and file.

on imports of essential foodstuffs. And neither the UNP's agricultural policies, from colonisation schemes to 'green revolution' (1965-70), nor the SLFP's import-substitution and nationalisation schemes had produced either self-sufficiency in food or industrial take-off. Instead, the former had made for few rural capitalists and a number of small peasant cultivators and the latter for a new *mudalali* (entrepreneur) class and an expanding public sector. Both sets of policies favoured the Sinhala-Buddhists in the rural areas, but left out of the reckoning their children who, raised on free education and populist rhetoric, demanded jobs and socialism.* And when the UF government failed to produce on the one and renege on the other, the Sinhala youth rose up in armed rebellion. They had organised themselves secretly into a close-knit revolutionary party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP – People's Liberation Front), five years earlier, and it now needed the concerted efforts of several governments to help the UF put down the insurrection. When it finally succeeded, it did so with ruthless efficiency, wiping out some 8,000 youths** without socialist qualm or populist tear from the population figures of the country, and detaining 14,000 more.

The insurrection occurred in April 1971, but for the rest of its term of office, which the UF, with 125 out of 151 seats in parliament, extended with impunity to 1977, the government governed under emergency regulations – curbing civil rights, inhibiting judicial independence, muzzling the press, banning strikes in essential services (which covered everything from the manufacture of ice to the supply of water) and prohibiting political activity. And it used these regulations to put Tamil student militants in detention, where some of them came into contact with JVP detainees for the first time. (The JVP, based in the Sinhala-Buddhist heartland, had not addressed itself to the 'Tamil question' except to point to the threat of 'Indian expansionism' with which they sometimes identified the estate workers.)

In 1972, the government introduced a new constitution making the National State Assembly, 'the supreme instrument of state power' (legislative, executive, judicial), and registering Sri Lanka as a

* Over 14 per cent of the population (of 12 million) were unemployed. Of these, over 70 per cent were in the rural areas and aged between 19-25, nearly all of them educated to secondary school level.

** This is the figure given in *Nouvel Observateur* (23 May 1971) by René Dumont, who was in Ceylon during the insurrection. Others have put it higher, but exact figures are hard to come by as the UF government's Emergency Regulations of March 1971 authorised police officers 'to take all such measures as may be necessary for the taking possession and burial or cremation of any dead body' without having to account in any way before the law. It was a regulation that was to be renewed by President Jayewardene in 1983.¹⁴

Buddhist state with Sinhala as its official language.*

A press bill followed, bringing the 'capitalist press' under government control.** Since Radio Ceylon was already a state corporation, the national media was now virtually in government hands. As for local government elections, they just dropped out of sight.

While the UF government was putting its political house in order, its Finance Minister, Dr. N.M. Perera, was running back and forth from Washington trying to get the IMF to give him a socialist loan or two. Nationalisation was proving to be costly and import-substitution looked as though it still needed foreign assistance – by way of machinery and plant and some raw material even. But these were schemes which, apart from being 'socialist' and, more importantly, seen to be such, were helping to create a truly indigenous class of capitalists to serve the country and a fine up-standing state bureaucracy to serve the people. And, of course, you couldn't have the one without the other. To do business you needed quotas, licenses, permits, bank credit (that's why they nationalised the banks) – and that's where state patronage came in – and the state bureaucracy to channel that patronage. And the bureaucrats themselves were state appointees. But that's what planning is all about. And planning is socialism.

If this Trotskyite version of socialism brought a blush to Muscovite cheeks, it also gratified the populism of the SLFP – for a while. For the expanding public sector had opened up avenues of employment for the Sinhala rural youth from whose ranks the JVP insurgents had sprung. But to make sure that they could find room at the top, the government introduced standardisation schemes in education, whereby weightage was to be given to rural youth as against their urban counterparts – a sort of positive discrimination/affirmative action for the disadvantaged. That at least was the ostensible purpose behind district-wise standardisation, and since urban schools had better equipment, science facilities, teachers, etc., it appeared to be a justifiable one and not aimed specifically at Tamils in Jaffna schools.*** But prompted by Sinhala-Buddhist agitation and JVP insurgency, the government also introduced a media-wise standardisation scheme which was a method of adjusting examination marks between the two language media so

* The chief architect of this constitution was another 'revolutionary marxist', Dr Colvin R. de Silva (who appears later in these pages in the guise of the Minister of Plantation Industries).

** This was directed at Associated Newspapers, whose owners had for decades virtually told the nation what to think and how to vote – and had earlier mounted a filthy campaign against Mrs Bandaranaike personally at the elections. Government control was, among other things, short-sighted, as it was bound to serve the interests of the UNP, the press' class allies, when the government changed.

*** But, since districts included towns, this weightage system did not act in favour of the rural areas either.¹⁵

that those sitting in the Sinhala medium needed fewer marks to get into university than those sitting in the Tamil medium.

The effect on the Tamils was momentous. Standardisation wiped out at a stroke the meagre opportunities that education had held out for the up-country Tamils, and for the Tamils in the North and East it put paid to all ambition and hope. Already their language had been taken from them, and with that their access to government jobs. And then this government had narrowed it further with a chit system which gave jobs only to political appointees; but then, there was no public sector development at all in the North and East. Trade too had gone into Sinhala hands with the government's entry into the import and retail business. But the Tamils had continued through education to make it to the professions. Now that also was taken from them. Language and learning – these were their land, their livelihood, their legacy, their sense of civilisation. They had not built great tanks and irrigation schemes or even managed to industrialise their homelands, but they had written poems, played plays and sung such songs – literature was their art form – and music. Language had lent itself to the first, the harshness of work to the second. And now it was all taken from them – and had made a bleak land bleaker still.

In January 1974, the Tamils held a congress in Jaffna to celebrate their Tamil language and Tamil culture. Tamil poets, philosophers, scholars and artists came from all over the Tamil-speaking world to be present at the occasion. Mrs Bandaranaike opposed the idea of the conference but could not in the glare of such publicity forbid it. But Mayor Duraiyappah, the SLFP's Tamil stooge, got the message and cleared out of town, leaving the police a free hand. And on the last day of the conference, with the conference spilling over from Veerasingham Hall on to the esplanade outside to make itself available to the thousands assembled there, the police on the pretext of an unwarranted public meeting charged into the crowd with tear gas and baton, bringing down the electric pylons and killing nine people in the process.

The youth were stunned. The government held out no comforting hand or apology. The Tamil United Front – a consortium of Tamil bourgeois parties (the FP, the TC and the CWC)* – provoked into unity by the Sinhala-Buddhist Constitution of 1972, indulged in its customary rhetoric and did nothing. And the youth took it upon themselves to take on the Sinhala state. A series of bank robberies followed and as the police, put beyond the reach of law by emergency

* The Tamil leaders of these parties were plantation owners and employers of Indian Tamil estate workers. 'G.G. Ponnambalam (TC) was the owner of Sri Niwasa estate at Waga, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam (FP) was the owner of an estate in Maskeliya and Thondaman (CWC) was the owner of Wavenden estate in Pusellawa and Medegoda estate in Dolosbage.'¹⁶

law, stepped up their operations, the youth organised themselves into the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) and elected to shoot down the arrogant and strutting symbol of Sinhala state power in Jaffna, Alfred Duraiyappah. It was a slap in the face for the government, who promptly arrested and detained and tortured over a hundred young people at random and then proceeded to erect a statue to Duraiyappah in the heart of Jaffna town. (The imperial lesson had not been unlearnt even by the marxists in the government.)

The state repression that followed Duraiyappah's killing drove the burgeoning movement underground, where it began to ponder the tenets and practice of marxism. Already, the activities of San-mugathasan's CCP in leading the depressed castes' temple entry movement in Jaffna in the latter part of the 1960s were fresh in their minds, and from their teachers they had learnt of the Jaffna Youth League and the once progressive policies of the LSSP and CP. But they were also immersed in the nationalist rhetoric of the FP and the TC who, like their Sinhala counterparts, kept harking back to a glorious past when the Tamils had their own kingdom. It was a powerful argument for a people bereft of dignity and belonging and particularly for the young who, in addition, were bereft of a future and met at the same time the marxist requirements for nation-hood. The marxists themselves - those outside parliament that is - had substituted rote learning for concrete investigation and shoved it all back to the Tamil youth for resolution under the rubric of the national question. And this uneasy mating of bourgeois historicism with historical materialism has continued to plague the theory and practice of Tamil revolutionaries even today.

Meanwhile, in 1975, the government socialists (there used to be government Christians under the British) achieved the summit of their nationalisation policies by taking over the plantations (which were losing money anyway) and paying compensation to their foreign owners. Three years earlier, the government had taken over private land in excess of twenty-five acres (paddy) and fifty (other produce). Some of the land so recaptured was alienated to the Sinhala peasantry (Mrs Bandaranaike was reversing the betrayal of her Radala fore-fathers when they sold out the Kandyan people to the British, taking some of their common land as payment). Other land was turned over to cooperatives under the aegis of MPs. Together, these measures dispossessed a whole host of plantation workers of their livelihood and reduced them to destitution and death on the roads of Nawalapitiya and Gampola and Hatton.*

But even as the UF reached its socialist summit, its constituent parts

* The Minister of Plantation Industries was the Trotskyite Colvin R. de Silva, the Constitution-maker of 1972.

fell to bickering over who should take the credit for the ascent, the LSSP or the SLFP, and whose constituency should benefit by it – and Mrs Bandaranaike promptly settled the argument by dismissing the LSSP from the coalition. The CP followed somewhat (a year and a half in fact) later – and parliament was dissolved soon afterwards.

In July 1977, the UNP swept into power, with 140 out of 168 seats. The LSSP and CP won not one, the SLFP eight. The Tamil United Liberation Front, who had added Liberation (TULF) to Unity (TUF) in its 1976 Conference in order to keep up with ‘the boys’ and now stood for the separate state of Eelam, won eighteen seats and became the main opposition party – and its leader, Amirthalingam became the official leader of the alternative government of the Sinhala state!

State capitalism was over, but it had left in its wake a detritus of broken promises, half-baked industrial schemes, bits and pieces of land reform, rising prices, debt and corruption. And it had created a Sinhala-Buddhist state-class, institutionalised (and constitutionalised) racism and re-created the culture of racial superiority. The Tamils were a people apart, Jaffna another country, without benefit of employment or education or economic advancement, separate – except for central control. And even that control was no longer through representative local government (local elections had ceased in 1971) but through appointees of the state and its police force and, occasionally, the army. The army was by now almost all Sinhalese (it boasted a whole regiment of them called Sinha Regiment), though the navy and the air force still had a sprinkling of Tamils, mostly in the upper echelons, and the police was fast becoming a force of Sinhalese only, but again with willing Tamils in the higher ranks. It would not be long before there was one government (civil) for the Sinhalese and another (military) for the Tamils.

In education, the state’s policy of separate development created not only a Sinhala ‘stream’ and a Tamil ‘stream’ (so that nation shall not speak unto nation!) and made the one superior to the other through ‘standardisation’,* but also carried on the theme of Arya-Sinhala racial superiority into Sinhala textbooks. Tamils (let alone other communities) seldom appeared in these books and when they did it was as invaders or immigrants. In the meticulous phraseology of the Council for Communal Harmony through the Media (CCHM), ‘not only do the Sinhala readers continue to maintain their monocultural character in these grades [3 - 9]; they also project an image of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity which is defined fundamentally through opposition to and

* Sri Lanka must be the only country in the world where such affirmative action is used to safeguard the interests of the majority on the ground that they are a minority – in the world; but, then, so are the Chinese.

struggle against Tamil invaders in past history'. By contrast, the Tamil readers issued by the same government department were all multi-cultural in their content and contained 'material presenting relations of friendship between Tamil children on the one hand and both Sinhala and Muslim children on the other'.¹⁷ Whatever the racist thinking behind this policy - and the readers, published under the last government, continue to be reprinted under this - it should certainly help to produce a generation of small-minded, insular Sinhala nazis.

If this is one waste of human potential, there is yet another in the plantation areas, where institutionalised racism first raised its head and now thrives on 'benign neglect' - with no schools worth speaking of, no books, no equipment, not enough teachers. 'What goes by the name of the *Maha Vidyalaya* (high school) at Welimada', mourns Gnanamuttu, 'consists of two half-walled buildings. The senior section of the school ... is a few feet below the main road. It has to compete with a bi-weekly fair with its dust, its noise and its smells. The junior section with its half-walls are dangerously near the river, which in January 1975 invaded the school and carried away its furniture...'¹⁸

If the culture of racism was being bred in the schools, it was disseminated through the Sinhala media and reproduced in the singularly Sinhala-Buddhist activities of the Ministry of Culture. The 'independent' press, still (by and large) anti-SLFP and anti-Left, was confidently Sinhala-Buddhist rather than overtly racist, but the North and the East of the country may well not have existed for all the coverage they got in these papers. The state-controlled radio was rarely impartial in its reporting of events (in the Sinhala medium) and its interpretation of events, if not the reports themselves, often diverged as between the Sinhala and English programmes. The Sinhala music it broadcast was, perhaps inevitably, (given the 'culture' of the times) narrowly nationalist: where Somapala and Chitra once sang meaningless love lyrics, Nanda Malini Gokula's mellifluous voice now conveyed the message of the Lion Race in the nursery songs that a mother sang to her child as she put him to sleep.

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs, for its part, saw Sri Lankan culture as wholly Sinhala-Buddhist. And nowhere was this clearer than in the plethora of art exhibitions, music festivals, folk dance and drama that it assembled for the Non-Aligned Conference in 1976. Or look at the Sri Lanka Year Book for, say, 1975, under Fine Arts and Cultural Activities and see whether you can find one mention of Tamil art or craft, never mind 'culture'.

It was, however, in the 'commanding heights of the economy' that state racism held sway. Between them, nationalisation and import-substitution and government control of the import-export business had 'corporatised' and bureaucratised virtually every avenue of economic activity. And since state corporations were invariably situated in

Sinhala areas for the benefit of Sinhala voters, and appointments both to them and to the state bureaucracy were made on the basis of political patronage, Tamils could rarely find employment in the public sector. If they tried their hand at trade, their path was blocked not only by the need to get quotas, permits and licences, which were generally available only to political favourites, but also by government cooperatives which now handled almost all of the import and retail business, from rice and flour to toothbrushes and toys, both in the villages and in the towns. If they tried industry, hopefully under the aegis of the government's protectionist policies, they found they had little or no access to credit facilities. 'The local credit market', as Newton Gunasinghe has pointed out in his brilliant essay on the economics of racism (though he doesn't call it that), was 'dominated by the two state banks. The directors of these were also persons appointed on the basis of political patronage and were closely linked to the political parties in power. Given this situation, the same conditions that applied to the issuance of quotas, permits and licences applied to the granting of bank credit. Here too, Sinhala entrepreneurs linked to the ruling political party stood to gain, whereas Tamil entrepreneurs, especially the middle-level ones who enjoyed no upper-class social status and lacked political patronage, did not enjoy any specific advantage.'¹⁹ And even those Tamils who did manage, by virtue of their class, to enjoy political patronage - and they were never more than a handful - seldom extended their enterprise to the Tamil areas.

If colonial capitalism had failed to penetrate the North and East, neither state capitalism nor the private enterprise that grew in its shadow made any impact on them either. But then, the driving force of under-developed state capitalism is not economic but political and ideological. The politics is the politics of achieving and keeping power, the ideology that of reinforcing and substantiating that politics. The vehicle for the first is (initially) social democracy, the basis for the second the culture of a soured nationalism which failed to take on colonial capitalism and therein find its progressive dynamic. Where that culture is not homogeneous (what culture is?) and falls neatly into communal categories, themselves the result of differential social formations, it is these categories that are exploited to achieve political power. The process of maintaining - and reproducing - that power, however, wins for one community economic (and political) dominance over all others and alters the relationship between them from the horizontal to the vertical, in a hierarchy of power. When that hierarchy then becomes institutionalised in the apparatuses of the state, accepted by civil society and authenticated by ideologies of racial superiority and/or historical primacy, communalism takes on the dimensions and class connotations of racism.²⁰

To put it differently. Communalism implies a parallel relationship

between (communal) groups, antagonistic perhaps but not necessarily unequal; racism connotes a hierarchical relationship of power, institutionalised in the state apparatus. Communal violence, therefore, refers to that which occurs between (communal) groups, not to that inflicted on one group by the state, representing another. Hence, the use of the term (communal) 'riots', when what is meant - or should be - is state pogroms.* This is not just a euphemism but a violent distortion of the truth - which further adds to the pretended innocence of the state. Communalism is an 'afraid' word.

Communalism is also a portmanteau word: it takes in all the dirty linen of religion, language, culture, 'ethnicity'. And it is a flat word, one-dimensional - gives no idea of the dynamics of relationships within a community or between communities.

Above all, communalism, like ethnicity, is a pluralist word in a class world. They both describe, but don't tell - are historicist rather than historical. Worse, they pretend that society is all vertical; differentiated by 'ethnic' or communal groups and not by class, or, if by class, only as a sub-division of ethnicity or at best 'linked' to it. And this is not just a distortion of reality, but an acceptance of it - a prelude either to side-tracking it into 'group conflict' or abstracting it into 'the national question'.

Communal categories belong to the period of colonial capitalism, when they were disinterred from their social formations to serve British rule. They came to maturity in the decades before independence in what Bipan Chandra has called a 'vicarious nationalism'²¹ - which, in the years following, impregnated the body politic, to give birth to state racism.** And it is that racism which is today growing into fascism.

From racism to fascism

The UNP came to power in 1977 with the best of capitalist intentions - or so it seemed from their manifesto. They were going to get rid of all that stuffy state corporation business and let the clean air of free enterprise blow through their open economy. They were going to do away with racism and corruption because these things fouled up the capitalist works. They would restore the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of the press. They would not only maintain existing welfare programmes such as subsidised food and free educational and medical services - for that, after all, was the tradition

* The Centre for Society and Religion, which prides itself on its work for social justice, but retreats into pietism on race matters, calls them 'communal disturbances'. Others, mainly academics (both Tamil and Sinhala), talk of 'inter-ethnic hostility', 'ethnic disharmony', etc.

** Its bastard child was already in existence in the plantations.

of the country – but even increase the weekly rice ration. They understood that the demand of the ‘Tamil-speaking people’ for a separate state arose from ‘the lack of a solution to their problems’ and promised an early all-party conference that would ‘take all possible steps to remedy the grievances in such fields as (1) Education (2) Colonisation (3) Use of Tamil language (4) Employment in the Public and semi-Public Corporations’. They aimed, above all, to create a ‘just and free society’ through righteous (*dharmista*) government.²²

Within two weeks of taking office, the *dharmista* government stood by and watched while its police burnt down the Jaffna market – because they had been refused free entry into the city’s carnival! Police arrogance and brutality had become the norm in Jaffna under the UF government, but the UNP’s readiness to turn a blind eye to police conduct now boosted their confidence. As the anti-Tamil violence, fired by rumour, was taken up by Sinhala mobs and spread to other parts of the country, the police not only did nothing but helped to fuel the rumours. The government contented itself with clapping on curfews which were broken – under police supervision. The Prime Minister, J.R. Jayewardene, refused to declare a state of emergency because it was ‘contrary to democratic principles’ – and for two weeks a reign of terror was unleashed on the Tamils. They were beaten, maimed, stabbed and killed in their hundreds, their children terrorised, their shops and houses looted and burnt. In Colombo alone, there were over 35,000 refugees crowded into six schools with bad sanitation, little food and less medical help – and threats of being bombed out of the camps as well – before being packed off, finally, to Jaffna by train and ship and plane.

But it was the plantation workers who suffered most. Their line-rooms were burnt, their possessions looted, the men beaten, the women gang-raped. And they ended up in transit camps. Transit to where, though? Jaffna? But Jaffna was not their home.²³

This was the first time that the ‘plantation Tamils’ had been subjected to mob violence, but then they had already been violated by successive governments for thirty years and left prey to attack. Sinhala-Buddhist ideology had long held them responsible for taking Sinhala land, but another strand had been added to it in recent years which held them responsible for taking Sinhala jobs – and the originator of this thinking had now arrived in the inner ranks of the cabinet.

This was the first time, too, that the police force had so openly connived at assault and arson and looting, but they had been given a free hand against the JVP in 1971 and against the Tamils ever since – with guarantee of absolution. The UNP could do no less.*

* Five years later, with proceedings still pending in the courts, the UNP passed an act indemnifying ministers, public officers, members of the security forces and members

It was a bad start for Jayewardene capitalism, but the IMF and World Bank rallied to his side – in exchange for devaluation, ‘rationalisation’ of food subsidies and cuts in the welfare programmes. A western aid consortium followed with added help to establish a Free Trade Zone and develop Colombo as a commercial and tourist centre. But the project above all which, according to the Finance Minister, had won the unequivocal support of the IMF and World Bank and ‘captured the imagination of the Aid-Group countries’ was the harnessing of the waters of the Mahaveli River to generate hydro-electric power and open out land in the Dry Zone. And it was not difficult to see why: if investors in the FTZ needed power, it would not be long before agribusiness needed land – and the day of the FTZs was fast receding, anyway.

But whatever the specific needs of the various projects, the overall requirement was ‘political stability’. That stability was assured in September 1978 by a new constitution (pushed through parliament in three weeks) which concentrated executive power in the hands of a President (elected directly), weakened parliament by making it responsible to him or her but not vice versa, and ushered in proportional representation as the basis for all future elections – thereby ensuring that no other party could ever again find the two-thirds majority necessary to play around with the constitution as the UNP could. And if investors needed further reassurance, Article 157 stipulated that no future government could revoke or alter any treaty or agreement entered into – on the basis of a two-thirds majority in parliament – with a foreign state or ‘its nationals ... corporations, companies and other associations’ for the ‘promotion and protection of their investments’.

But all these constitutional provisos could not safeguard, let alone attract, foreign investment if it was constantly being threatened by labour problems and civil strife. The unions could be brought into line with an Essential Services Act (like that of the UF), and their membership, in any case, was moving from the ranks of the defeated parties to the UNP’s union, the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS), under Mathew, the Minister of Industries. As for the left-wing disorder of the JVP, their fangs had been drawn by the release of their leaders from jail and into electoral politics.²⁵ But there was still ‘the Tamil problem’. The pogroms of 1977 and the detentions and torture that followed had served only to increase the militancy of the Tamil youth and their uncompromising commitment to fight the Sinhala state. Only a few months earlier, they had killed the notorious torturer and traitor, Inspector Bastiampillai, and set up the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

acting under their authority in respect of acts committed during the communal disturbances of August 1977 ‘with a view to restoring law and order’.²⁴

(LTTE). The President had proscribed them, but now he was holding out a palliative by offering in the constitution the status of a national language for Tamil. And though that status was not quite defined, he hoped perhaps that it would count as a step in the right direction and a sign of his resolve to tackle the 'Tamil question'.*

But the President reckoned without the racists in his government who kept up a constant barrage of anti-Tamil propaganda within parliament and out. Mathew, the Minister of Industries, made a dramatic 'exposure' in the House of the way Tamil examiners were cheating in the marking of 'A' level Tamil medium papers to the detriment of Sinhala students. The charge was never investigated officially, (despite demands by the university teachers both Sinhala and Tamil), but Mathew had found another platform - and a privileged one at that - to broadcast his poisonous views. And if that was not enough, he made use of the government press to publish and distribute free of charge a book of his accusations with a preface by a *bhikkhu* in Sinhala and English. De Alwis, the Minister of State, sang the praises of the priests who had set out once again from their *viharas* and their temples to save Buddhism from the marauding Tamils. 'But for the venerable monks', he pointed out, 'there would be no Sinhala race ... no Buddhism ... no culture known as the culture of Sri Lanka.'²⁶

The government-controlled press picked up the racist themes and launched its own campaigns against the Tamils, highlighting racially inflammatory stories and giving different versions of events in the different language papers. Anything that happened in the North, from bank robbery to common assault, was described as terrorism. There was no news of Jaffna except sensational news - no ordinary people there leading ordinary lives - and a culture was growing up in the South which viewed all Tamils, including the TULF!, as terrorists. And again, it was Mathew and his cohorts who, having helped to orchestrate the definition, now provided the solution: 'Terrorists have to be killed because they are terrorists. They are like mad dogs and no better than that.'²⁷

The government was setting itself up for an armed confrontation with the Tamil youth. And when, in July 1979, a Tamil police inspector was shot dead in Jaffna, the President clamped down a state of emergency in Jaffna District and sent in Sinhala troops, under Brigadier Weeratunga, with orders to wipe out terrorism within six months. The combined police and army operations, under emergency laws and then under an even more horrendous Prevention of Terrorism

* With the inauguration of the new constitution, the President raised Thondaman, the leader of the plantation workers and president of their biggest union, the CWC, to cabinet rank. Another (UNP) Tamil, Devanayagam, was already Minister of Justice!

Act* (which combined the worst features of both the British and South African Acts), resulted in the mutilation and murder of three youths, the disappearance of three others,** the detention and torture of several people and the terrorisation of the whole population.²⁸

At the end of the six months, the spectre of terrorism that Mathew and Co. had summoned up and the President had sent troops to 'wipe out' had been made flesh by the army – and provoked the counter-violence of the Tamil youth. From now on, it was war against the state and its occupying army. If the UF's economic policies had made the Tamils a separate people, the UNP's political tactics were making them a separate nation.

It was a politics, however, that ran against the grain of an open economy which, of nature, lets a thousand capitalist flowers bloom. The top level entrepreneurs (Sinhala and Tamil), as Newton Gunasinghe points out, could now unfold into their next phase of expansion and make it to the export markets through joint ventures with foreign capital.²⁹ But the middle entrepreneurs, who had thrived in the hot house of state protection to produce their import-substitution goods, were pushed out into the cold by foreign imports. The effect of liberalising trade, however, and setting it free of government cooperatives was to give the middle level Tamil entrepreneurs, who had not been cosseted by the state, an edge over their Sinhala counterparts.***

Jobs, too, were becoming less difficult for Tamils to get with the growth of trade and commerce, tourism and the service sector – areas in which proficiency in the Sinhala language was not particularly advantageous. For the poorer classes, both Sinhala and Tamil, migration to the oil-rich Middle East was opening up a veritable eldorado of instant riches and consumer culture.

But none of these developments went North and East. If it was indeed capitalism that was flourishing in the rest of the country, it was making no headway in the Tamil areas. The Tamil youth were still trapped in a racist educational system and denied economic mobility. Tamil land in the North, where it was not being state-settled by Sinhala colonists, was not going to be irrigated by the Mahaveli project either. The small market-gardener in Jaffna who produced cash crops like onions and chillies and potatoes was hit by the imports of these commodities from India and Pakistan. Tamil industry did not have

* The Minister of Justice, under whom the Act was passed, was Devenayagam, a Tamil.

** These were youths who were arrested by the police on 14 July (before Brigadier Weeratunga arrived in Jaffna). The bodies of two of them were found mutilated, one died later in hospital and the bodies of three others were never found.

*** It was no accident, therefore, that Tamil businesses in Colombo were marked out for attack by the planners of the July 1983 pogroms (see other articles in this issue).

government blessing or blandishment to inveigle foreign capital. The Trincomalee port in the East might still gain some attention from imperial interests but, for that very reason, would remain an exclusive concern of the Sinhala state. Whatever tourist industry there was on the east coast – and the Tourist Board which gave out the licences was run by De Alwis – was in Sinhala hands. And even where the Mahaveli might still reach out to the predominantly Tamil district of Batticaloa, Sinhala colonists would be brought in to reap its benefits.

What under-developed capitalism could not develop, state racism had to contain. And when the resistance to that racism reached, of necessity, the proportions of armed struggle, the containment policies of the state would seek a military solution.

That, however, was not going to guarantee the political stability that Jayewardene had promised the IMF and the World Bank. And now that he, deft wielder of carrot and stick that he thought he was, had done his stick bit by sending the army 'to wipe out the menace of terrorism in six months', he would do the thing with the carrot by offering the Tamils a chance to run their own local affairs through the District Development Councils (DDCs).*

The TULF was prepared to go along with the President and participate in the elections to the DDCs in the North and East in June 1981, but the Tigers,** whose number and variety had grown through state repression, denounced them and the TULF. Since 1979, the war between the Sinhala state and the Tamil youth had escalated. Armed with guns they had taken from the enemy and moving about on bicycles through *olungais* (labyrinthine lanes) that ran into other *olungais*, losing the pursuing police or army and their cumbersome vehicles in the process,*** they had become adept at bank raids and ambushes and, in March 1981, had pulled off a daring robbery of the state bank in Neervelli (Jaffna). The arrests, detentions and tortures that followed have been recorded elsewhere in this journal and by Amnesty International, but the effect of them was to turn the North into a cauldron of resistance.

Despite that, however, the President decided to go ahead with the elections to the DDCs. It was no longer a matter of 'concessions' but of will: he was determined to show the Tamils that not everyone wanted Eelam, even if he had to force them to vote. Accordingly, he put up

* DDCs were introduced by the Jayewardene government as a form of local administration with central (ministerial) control.

** The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who grew out of the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), were the first group to take up armed struggle. Other groups have sprung up since then but, whatever their temporary differences, they all are, as far as the Tamil people are concerned, their common liberators. And it is in that generic sense that the term is used here.

*** The government was at one stage to propose the banning of bicycles in Jaffna.³⁰

UNP candidates and sent in a special contingent of police to supervise the elections – followed by ministers Mathew and Dissanayake. A (Tamil) UNP candidate was assassinated, a policeman killed and the police and the army went on the rampage – burning looting and killing – burning down this time the Jaffna Library as well and its monumental collection of books and manuscripts. Unable to wipe out a people, they were driven to destroy their heritage.* The barbarians had arrived – under one guise or another.

The elections still went ahead, but not all the rigging and the tampering could yield up one UNP seat in the North. The TULF won them all. And the government brought in a motion of no confidence in the TULF leader – on the grounds that he had slandered Sri Lanka abroad – and slandered the Tamil people instead in the House and in the press, inciting violence against the Tamils in the South and East and, once more, on the plantations. But this time, the attacks on the estate workers, carried out by private armies – in government buses – had all the hall-marks of politicians in high places. And so horrendous was the mayhem and the murder visited on these defenceless people that it even moved the President to cry out, 'what sort of animals are these?' But a few months later, the army was moving into the estate workers' squatter settlements in Vavuniya, where they had been driven by previous pogroms, and taking away for questioning the Gandhiyam volunteers who had helped them resettle – on the pretext that they (the volunteers) were 'terrorists'.** Once again, the most abysmally poor and exploited section of the Tamil people had been chosen for a dry run for the planning of pogroms yet to come.

Jayewardene was caught up in the vortex of his own manipulations, an uncertain accomplice now of the forces he himself had unleashed. Neither the imperatives of a capitalist economy which required the dismantling of institutional racism nor the concentration of political power in one party and one man which made that dismantling possible had guided government policies. But then, the very forces that brought the government to power and gave it such a massive majority were also those that kept the government from according the Tamil people their basic rights. Those forces were now represented in the cabinet itself and given access to state power. The Minister of Industry and Scientific

* In the entire catalogue of carnage, arson, pillage and murder ...', wrote Ian Goonetilleke, the doyen of Sri Lankan librarians and bibliophiles, 'the complete destruction by an act of calculated and cold-blooded incendiarism of the splendid Jaffna Public Library is the most wounding to the sensibility of our brethren in the North, and must outrage the human feelings of every person in the land, whatever his political, racial or religious persuasion.'³¹

** Gandhiyam was a charity set up in 1976 by Tamils as a community and social service. It mainly helped settle plantation Tamil refugees who fled from the hill country in 1977 and 1981.

Affairs, the Minister of Lands and Mahaveli Development and the Minister of State were all self-avowed Sinhala supremacists, and the first two had a close working relationship with the Buddhist clergy who, like the Associated Newspapers of an earlier period, were now become king-makers.

The contradictions between the economics of capitalism and the politics of racism were thus epitomised within the cabinet itself – and pointed the way to the authoritarian state. Already in the various confrontations that the government had had with the unions, the UNP's JSS had been used, either as an unofficial army of thugs or as an official government union, to beat up or counter-demonstrate against the striking workers. In July 1980, a general strike brought about by soaring inflation, rising food prices, welfare cuts and repressive trade union legislation, such as the Essential Services Act, had been crushed by the JSS at the cost of a worker's life and followed up by the government's sacking of some 80,000 workers. Protests and demonstrations by university students had been settled with summary violence and the same goon squads had disrupted public meetings that had anything to say against the government.

Now, with the economy in a mess and the aid-givers worried about 'political stability', the government decided to kow-tow to the IMF further. The FTZ had not been a success: Sri Lanka had clearly come in at the fag-end of the multinationals' 'putting-out' system in the micro-electronics and garment industries.* Joint venture investments outside the FTZ had served more to open up the domestic market for foreign investors than the foreign market for domestic entrepreneurs. The Mahaveli project was becoming increasingly costly and the funds for its various sub-projects not readily available. But it still held out the one real attraction – for agri-business. The Minister of Lands had made no bones about it when he announced in March 1981 the government's intention 'to ask for all forms of agricultural and agro-based industrial investment', and pointed to Guthries' proposed lease of 28,000 acres for palm oil production.** This would, however, take the government away from its stated plans for immediate self-sufficiency in food and add to the disgruntlement of the peasantry. There was also the possibility of leasing out Trincomalee as a naval base to the USA – and the Reagan administration is certainly keen to firm up its hold in the Indian Ocean – but this again has not found favour with the public.

* Technologies in both these fields had advanced so much and so fast that it was becoming more profitable to bring them back home or use the already well-tried assembly lines abroad. The main attraction that Sri Lanka's FTZ offered was its export quota in the garment industry – to those countries like Hong Kong, Korea and Singapore who had used up their export quotas.

**Whether this particular project came off in the end is uncertain, but others are certainly in the pipe-line.

Clearly what was required for economic advancement and the political stability it called for was stronger and longer government. And since the President's stock, the President felt, was higher in the country than his government's, he brought forward the elections to the Presidency to October 1982 by amending the constitution, and won – thanks to the self-annihilating policies of the opposition (from the SLFP to the LSSP and JVP!) who all put up candidates.

The prolongation of parliament was another matter, but there was always the four-fifths majority in the House to amend the constitution yet again and bring in a referendum in lieu of elections to justify the government staying in power. It was essentially a vote asking the voters to give up their right to vote. But this time it was not so much the inter-necine politics of the opposition that gave the government a victory, but its use of intimidation, impersonation, forgeries, theft (of ballot boxes), assault and every known violation of electoral practice and principle (and some purely Sri Lankan). It was a method of electioneering that had been perfected and legitimated in the Tamil North – but had passed the Sinhala voters by.

Political violence had become an accepted method of government and a culture of violence had now settled on the land. And with it, hand in hand, went a culture of open economy consumerism, Middle East bonanzas and tourist titillations, of greed and selfishness and dog-eat-dog relationships – all of which were paraded and perpetuated by an arse-licking government press. There was no public debate or discussion which did not break into altercation or fisticuffs, no protest or demonstration which was not set upon by hooligans and thugs. Women were not beyond assault, whether they were workers in the garment industries at Ekala or ex-MPs leading a march of women on International Women's Day. And it did not matter that they might be elderly: that respect for the old, which Sri Lankan culture once boasted, was gone. Instead, policemen who carried out such violence were rewarded with promotion and judges who found against them intimidated by goons brought in on government buses to flaunt their thuggery before their justices' homes.

Eminent scholars who voiced their opinions of dissent in public were set upon and beaten – while piddly little sociologists who descended into the lurid investigation of sexual manners or historians who cobbled together books from other people's books or researchers in institutions that produced great tomes of meaningless abstraction which left them safe continued to make it into the upper echelons of academia. The universities themselves had ceased to be places of learning and become the seed-beds of reactionary excellence – and provided the climate for the racial violence that erupted in the Peradeniya University in May 1983, when Sinhala students assaulted and chased Tamil students out of the campus, or a few weeks later in the Colombo Medical Hostel,

when Tamil students were again harassed and beaten up.*

Real learning was scorned and learned men, doyens of Buddhist education who once upheld the great Buddhist heritage of scholarship and truth, fallen prey to government propaganda and preferments.

And Buddhism itself had ceased to be the great philosophy of *ahimsa* and become the tool of a venal clergy in search of secular power. The influence they once had over the minds and mores of people through their own self-abnegating and disciplined conduct of life, gentle and humane, guiding by precept and example, had in the course of three decades of virulent nationalism been exchanged for financial and political influence – till they were no more than fascist thugs in saffron robes recruiting private armies for primitive politicians, settling Sinhala settlers on Tamil land, pushing the Trojan horse of Buddhist shrines into the North and East, deciding government policy even before it is made – not king-makers any more but kings.

If the police and the army ran the North and the East, the *bhikkus* and the thugs provided law and order in the South.

The pogroms that followed in July and August 1983,** heralded by countless acts of brutality, torture and murder in Jaffna and Vavuniya and Trincomalee and culminating in the merciless state-sponsored killing of helpless Tamils in jail, had for their context and their climate the policies of an authoritarian state, the spurious culture of imported capitalism, the degeneracy of the Sinhala intelligentsia and the decadence of Sinhala-Buddhist society – all of them the product, one way or another, of soured nationalism married to imperial capital, leading to dictatorship. But then, it is a pattern, with variations, that has been set in country after Third World country wherever the IMF and World Bank have set foot.

Against that mounting dictatorship stands only the armed resistance of the Tamil freedom-fighters – and whatever the goal in view, their immediate and inevitable task is to continue their unrelenting war against the fascist state, providing in the process the opportunity for the Sinhala people to mount their own resistance to the racism that corrodes their society and the fascism that thrives on it. Tamil liberation is the easier won through the weakening of the Sinhala state from within, socialism the surer achieved through struggles not narrowly nationalist. There is no socialism after liberation; socialism is the process through which liberation is won.

* For the substantiation of all these, see the courageous reports in the *Saturday Review*, *Lanka Guardian* and Civil Rights Movement documents.

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