

Silver lining (1986, February 15) India today

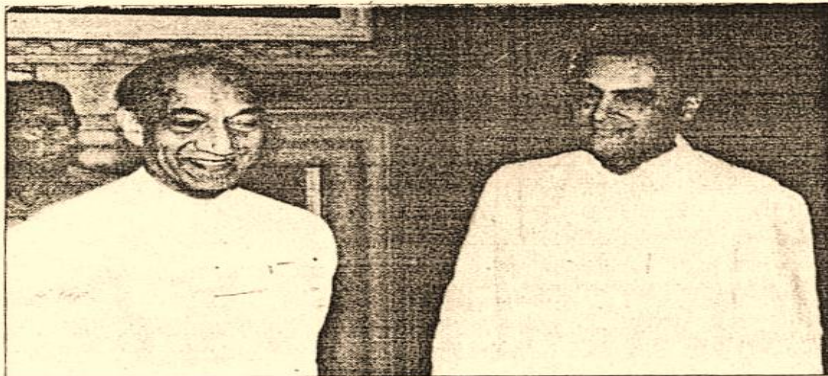
SRI LANKA

Silver Lining



CELEBRATED lyricist Algernon Charles Swinburne's contention that "even the longest river winds somewhere safe to sea" seems to be applicable to the Sri Lankan situation. Last fortnight it looked as if the chronic Tamil ethnic problem had edged nearer some kind of a settlement, and that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, as the mediator, was close to pulling off a hat-trick after the Punjab and Assam accords.

There were many pointers to a round-



Jayewardene and Rajiv: new hopes

the-corner settlement. Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene, who had recently been speaking in very aggressive terms about the need to militarily crush the Tamil militant movement, suddenly began to coo and woo. Last fortnight he told *The Hindu* newspaper of Madras: "Let the militants say we are giving up violence. Let them surrender their arms, close their camps, and begin a democratic life. I promise them a pardon, an unconditional pardon."

A subtle indication of the way things were being worked out was provided by the Sri Lankan National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali who observed in an interview: "The Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) believes in a military solution and to my mind it is the biggest stumbling block. The People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) is more accommodating and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) is prepared to talk."

The minister also said: "In 1986 I see the military position for the (Sri Lanka) Government improving, unless the ter-

rorists get military help from outside. As this process goes on we must somehow activate a process of dialogue. The signs are not entirely unhappy. I think some process of discussion will re-emerge."

That was perhaps an understatement. Some kind of an indirect negotiation is already going on between the Sri Lanka Government and the TULF with the Government of India acting as the mediator and messenger. The Sri Lanka Government had proposed autonomous district and provincial councils for the Tamils. All the Tamil groups had rejected them as not even remotely satisfying the aspirations of the Tamil people. The Government of India in turn asked the Tamil groups to state what they wanted.

Then the TULF submitted a detailed set

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of counter-proposals to the Government of India, which passed it on to Sri Lanka. These TULF counter-proposals sought state autonomy for all the Tamils of the island based on the federal principle. The first part of the counter-proposals clearly laid down that "Sri Lanka, that is *Ilankai*, shall be a union of states, and the northern and eastern provinces—which are predominantly Tamil

speaking—shall constitute one Tamil linguistic state." Added was a rider: "The territory of a state, once established, shall not be altered without its consent." The TULF also wanted the Tamil state to have full control over law and order and land settlement in its area.

According to reliable sources, the Sri Lanka Government circulated copies of the TULF counter-proposals to its ministers, experts, consultants, and advisers for comments so it is only a question of time before the Government officially reacts to the counter-proposals. The informal but categorical assertions of Jayewardene and Athulathmudali that the Government cannot grant linkage between the northern and eastern provinces under any circumstances (in other words ruling out one united Tamil linguistic state), and the TULF's repeated declarations that the merger of the north and the east as one united region is its minimum demand which it cannot compromise on should not make one lose hope. Said a Sri Lanka Government source: "There are intermediate positions between the TULF demand and the Government's stand, and Jayewardene is prepared to concede some

ground if the Indian Government can persuade the TULF to do the same."

That kind of an in-between meeting point did sound possible. Reports from Colombo indicated that Jayewardene was ultimately veering round to substantially conceding what was in the earlier annexure-C— which had in effect, granted the concept of a Tamil regional council, certainly an improvement over the district and provincial councils that the President has been playing around with from the Thimpu talks. There were also whispers in Colombo that the Sri Lanka Government was thinking of revoking the controversial sixth amendment to the constitution

The Government of India seemed to have realised this and the militants also explained to the Government of India their difficulties as guerrilla groups in negotiating directly with the Lanka Government and signing for something short of a separate state. Said an activist of Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front, (EPRLF), a constituent of the ENLF: "But we need India's help. After all we have sought refuge here. And the Indian Government is keen that a negotiated settlement should be found for the ethnic problem. So we assured India that we would have no objection if the TULF negotiated with the Sri Lanka Government."

opposed by hardline elements on both sides, as it happened in Punjab. A pragmatic settlement between the moderate TULF and the Sri Lanka Government would, therefore, be the best bet under the circumstances. India can then see what to do with the recalcitrant militants, while hoping that many of them will gradually opt to go back and resume normal life. The Sinhalese hardliners and the Buddhist clergy, not to speak of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, would be Jayewardene's headache.

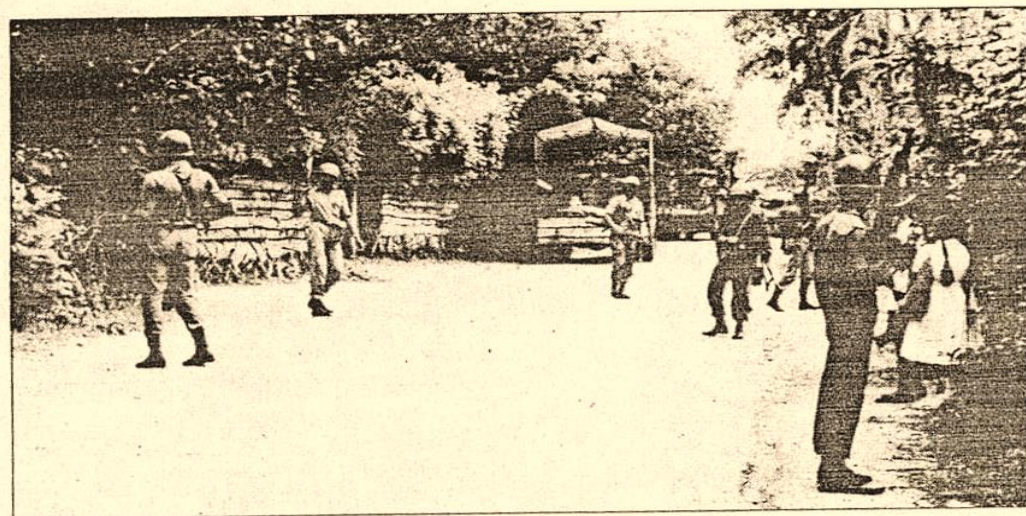
The Government of India is also confident now that it can successfully apply pressure on both the Sri Lanka Government and the Tamil militants to ensure some kind of a settlement and gradually get it implemented. India has been able to make Colombo see reason and undertake to grant Sri Lankan citizenship within one-and-a-half years to 94,000 people—mainly plantation workers of Indian origin who are now stateless in the island. These people hadn't opted for repatriation to India under the Srimavo-Shastri pact of 1964, and had been denied Sri Lankan citizenship. India was also able to convince Colombo that it would not be in a position to take back repatriates who qualify for Indian citizenship but who have not yet been ferried across till the Lanka refugees in Tamil Nadu return.

India is also in a position to force the hands of the militants when it comes to it. More than ever, the militants are now divided amongst themselves and demoralised. Confided an EPRLF leader: "Till now violent incidents, whether in Tamil Nadu or in Sri Lanka, used to take place only between a particular militant group and its dissidents. But now there are incidents between different major groups themselves."

Tamil militants are also accused in a number of criminal cases in Tamil Nadu, and assaults on local people are making them slowly lose sympathy. The Meenambakkam airport bomb blast of 1984 is an important case in point. One of the main accused in the case, Thambapillai Maheswaran—who is the leader of the Tamil Eelam Army—jumped bail and is still at large.

The Indian Government is thus in a position to twist the arms of the militants, specially with the large number of criminal cases pending against many of them hanging like the proverbial Damocles' sword over their heads. In that situation, the chances of a settlement are at its brightest in a long time.

—S.H. VENKATRAMANI



Sri Lankan troops combing Jaffna

It was a new language of peace and conciliation, therefore, that both the sides were speaking last fortnight. On the debit side, violence again erupted in the northern provinces of Sri Lanka. In and around Jaffna, there were street battles between the militants and the army.

Said Appapillai Amrithalingam, the secretary-general of the TULF: "We have told the Government of India that till the Sri Lankan Army stops its killings and the Sri Lanka Government positively responds to our counter-proposals we cannot negotiate any further."

The TULF obviously would like to do some hard bargaining. But the Government of India has now subtly reversed its priorities. Last year Rajiv Gandhi operated on the assumption that the killings will have to first stop for a negotiated settlement to be worked out. But now the Government of India, insiders say, feels that the killings will taper off once some kind of a speedy settlement can be worked out. The Government reasons that any kind of accord is bound to be

which required all MP's to solemnly declare their opposition to the idea of a separate state to retain their parliamentary membership.

These signs of hope bode well for the new active mediatory strategy that India has adopted on the Lanka problem. The Thimpu talks were a serious attempt by the Rajiv Gandhi Government to bring the Tamil militants for the first time face to face with the Sri Lankan side and get them to have fruitful discussions. The two rounds of discussions failed, because, as the convener of the Organisation for the Protection of the Tamils of Eelam from Genocide, S.C. Chandrahassan, observes: "The militant groups are not like political parties to sit across a table and come to a mutually acceptable solution with the Sri Lanka Government. They are guerrilla groups who have vowed to fight for Eelam and who have trained and committed cadres all the way down. So the leaders will run the risk of being done away with by their own cadres if they, on record, express themselves as being amenable to something short of Eelam."