

SRI LANKA

ROOTS

A Centuries-Old Schism

The wildfire of communal violence that raged across Sri Lanka last week left many observers wondering if much had changed in the past 2,500 years. Indeed, the ebb and flow of Sinhala-Tamil rivalry has marked the country's history. Among the early settlers, the Indo-Aryan Sinhalese were the first to fortify their positions on the idyllic island. They began trooping in during the fifth century B.C., to be joined soon after by the invading armies of Dravidian Tamils. Chroniclers have written about the exploits of two south Indian adventurers who overran the ancient kingdom of Anuradhapura and ruled for 22 years. Sinhala-Tamil contacts, though, didn't remain confined to the battle-field. A Sinhala king, Moggallana (491-508 A.D.), found it convenient to hire Tamil mercenaries to help oust rival Sinhala monarch, Kassapa. Some of the mercenaries stayed behind to emerge as powerbrokers in the courts of Sinhalese kings.

The major turning point in Sinhala-Tamil relations occurred with the rise, in south India, of three Hindu powers: the Pandyas, Pallavas and Cholas. Their arrival signalled an end to Buddhism in a part of India inhabited by Tamils. For Sri Lanka, the consequences were dramatic: as well as two opposing ethnic groups it now had two distinct religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. The rulers of south India made repeated forays into Sri Lanka throughout most of the first millennium; from 1255 onwards, the Sinhala kings made a tactical retreat into the hills, distancing themselves from the invaders. By the 13th century, Tamil settlers, joined by Tamil constituents of invading armies had succeeded in carving an independent kingdom in the northern part of the island.

The Tamil kingdoms lasted till the advent in the 17th century of the Portuguese and today Tamil separatists look back on the era to justify their claim to an independent nation.

The arrival of the British in the latter part of the 18th century added a new dimension to Sri Lanka's "Indian" problem. The colonialists brought in large numbers of Indian labourers to work on the island's coffee and tea plantations. Between 1871 and 1891 the number of Indian labourers grew from 123,000 to 235,000. While most remained confined to the plantations, some drifted to the urban centres in search of jobs.

Significantly, Tamil and Sinhalese politicians worked together in the early part of this century towards self-rule. In large measure, this was because they were regarded as the two majority communities on the island. That, however, was to change after 1922, when the Tamils were reduced to a minority in the elections to the Legislative Council. In spite

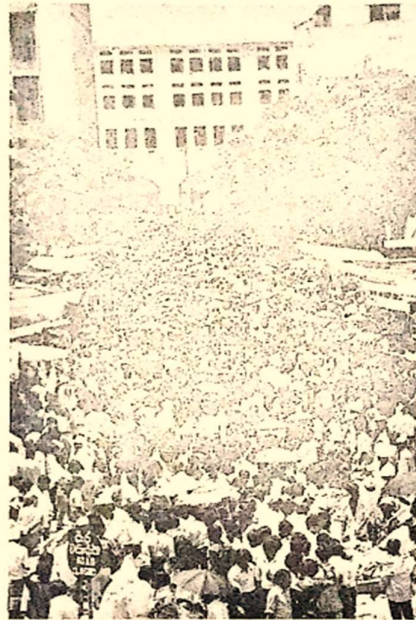
of the setback, Tamil politicians continued to fight for minority rights. They were vehemently opposed to the idea of self-government without sufficient safeguards for minority interests. Most Sinhalese politicians were aware of Tamil sentiments in the run up to Independence. In 1943, Tamil and Sinhalese were made the official languages. A recognition of the legitimate interests of the minority Tamil community became the cornerstone of the policy of Sri Lanka's first government after Independence. This helped the Sri Lanka's first prime minister, D.S. Senanayake win the support of the Tamil Congress during the crucial transition period. The only group to be left out, it appeared, were the Indian plantation workers who had been denied citizenship rights and the right to vote in local elections.

The death of Senanayake in 1952 was, according to some, the beginning of Sri Lanka's contemporary racial problems. His successors were unable to halt the slide in communal relations. The ruling United National Party (UNP) was trounced in the 1956 elections, and the victorious Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) buried the concept of a multi-racial polity because it didn't consider the concept politically viable. The SLFP years saw two major communal disturbances, one in 1958 and the other in 1961 when Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike announced a decision to make Sinhalese the national language of administration.

The Tamil issue remained at centre stage through most of the 1960s. The Federal Party representing Tamil interests joined hands with the UNP to defeat the SLFP in the 1965 elections, and the alliance paved the way for a new set of liberal laws on the language issue. The SLFP returned to power again in the 1970 elections. A new constitution drafted in 1972 gave primacy to Buddhism as the state religion and recognised Sinhalese as the state language. This

set the stage for a militant turn in the Tamil camp. For the first time since 1949, the two major Tamil parties, the Tamil Congress and the Federal Party, came together to work under the banner of the secessionist TULF.

Soon after J.R. Jayewardene's UNP won the 1977 elections by a landslide, it had to contend with one of the worst outbreaks of communal violence. For a change, the riots were brought under control without recourse to emergency powers. Jayewardene has in recent years introduced several liberal measures in an attempt to blunt the edge of the Tamil separatist movement. Chief among these: the elevation of Tamil as a national language (with Sinhalese remaining as the sole official language), removal of distinction between citizens by descent and registration and granting voting rights to Indian plantation workers. Clearly, though, these enlightened measures were not sufficient to douse the bitterness that had grown between the communities.



Colombo market, 1978: A growing bitterness