

# RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN SRI LANKA - FACT OR FICTION?

In the recent months we have seen a well-orchestrated campaign by some Tamils in the U.K. to depict the Sri Lanka Tamil as an oppressed minority whose basic rights are denied by the 'tyrannical' Sinhalese majority. This propaganda has been so well co-ordinated that many liberal journalists and politically conscious people in the U.K. have accepted these statements without any criticism or fair investigation.

It is time that this false propaganda and the people behind it were exposed so that those interested in Sri Lankan affairs are made aware of the real situation. We need go only so far as stating a few basic facts about Sri Lanka and her minorities in order to disprove the many statements made by the Tamil politicians in Sri Lanka and the racist Ealam Tamil Association based in London.

## The Historical Background

Sri Lanka is a multi-racial country with a population of over 13 million. The official population figures for 1971 showed the following breakdown according to the main races :

Sinhalese	71.9%	Indian Tamils	9.4%
Sri Lanka Tamils	11.1%	Moors	6.7%
Others	0.9%		

(Source : Dept. of Census and Statistics)

The Sinhalese are the direct descendants of a North Indian prince and his followers who landed in Sri Lanka circa 5th century B.C. They soon founded an independent civilization which was further strengthened and enriched by the introduction of Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C. The great achievements of the Sinhalese are clearly depicted in the economic and cultural growth witnessed by the new kingdom. The massive network of irrigation works which exist even to this day are a true monument to the technological expertise of the rulers and the ruled alike. The many thousands of extant

manuscripts and inscriptions speak of the rich literary and linguistic traditions of the people. The high standards of creativity in the fields of art, architecture, sculpture and painting may easily be assessed by a mere glance at the ruins of ancient capitals.

The prosperity of Sri Lanka as a kingdom of the Sinhalese became the envy of the Tamil rulers of South India. There were many attempts to invade the country and, eventually, in the 13th century they succeeded in capturing the Northern parts of Sri Lanka.

When the Portuguese - the first Western colonial power - arrived in Sri Lanka the Island consisted of three kingdoms : Kotte (in the Southwest), the Kandyan Kingdom (in the central highlands) and the Tamil Kingdom (in the North). Both the Portuguese and their successors - the Dutch - failed to capture the Kandyan Kingdom and no unification of the country was possible. It was only in 1815 after a long and ruthless campaign that the British succeeded in invading the Kandyan Kingdom and unifying the whole country. Sri Lanka remained a British colony until 1948 when she became independent. It is perhaps during this colonial period that the seeds of disharmony were sown leading to the present day misunderstandings and ill-feelings between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

### A Strange Paradox

The whole situation, however, presents a strange paradox. Quite contrary to what is being said today by some Tamil politicians, Sri Lanka has been a country where the minorities have discriminated against the majority! Under colonial rule marked by a 'divide-and-rule' policy, the Tamils generally received a better form of education and wider opportunities for employment. In every major city or township it was the Tamil community which owned the wealthier business concerns. They were the exclusive money lenders and pawnbrokers. Even the plantation worker of South Indian origin was far better off than the indigenous Sinhalese inhabitants of the central province. Under the land policy of the British the hill country peasant lost his traditional claim to his land holdings. By the year 1886 the colonial government had sold to the British planters no less than 20,000 acres. Even today it is the Sinhalese peasant in these areas who is landless, underemployed and poor, and NOT the plantation worker who, in spite of poor working conditions, is at least assured of regular employment.

This is why one might say that Sri Lanka presents a paradox an an unique example of a country where minorities enjoy better privileges than the majority. Naturally, therefore, the Tamil was able to outclass the Sinhalese - something that has led to the myth that the Tamil is more clever than the Sinhalese!

### The Concept of a Separate Tamil State

It is against the above background that one must necessarily study the present demands of the extremist Tamil United Liberation Front (T.U.L.F.).

In a document headed ' An Appeal to the Nations of the World from Ealam Tamils of Sri Lanka ' it is claimed that there are over 50 million Tamils spread all over the world and that it is a matter of despair to them that they have no 'homeland.' They have, therefore, decided to set up a separate state for the Tamils NOT in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu (size: 50,000 sq. miles; population : 41 million Tamils) but in the little island of Sri Lanka - a country only 25,332 sq. miles in size, and smaller than Scotland! To this newly-built 'homeland' will be invited the 50 million Tamils living in the other parts of the world!!

The whole idea is so ludicrous and idiotic that one wonders if the racialist Tamil leadership of the T.U.L.F. have taken leave of their senses!

No Tamil in Sri Lanka, except those politically-manipulated (this includes the racist groups in the U.K.), would ever want to surrender their privileges and live in isolation on a patch of desert land in the North.

### Minority Rights and Individual Liberties

A number of references were made earlier to the privileges the Tamils of Sri Lanka enjoy - a situation that makes the country unique among nations faced with racial problems.

To take the LANGUAGE issue first, the switch over from English to Sinhalese did not displace Tamil as a language of administration or as a medium of instruction in schools. One has only to study the many laws and regulations concerning language to ascertain the truth.

- The Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958 provides for:
- the use of Tamil as a medium of instruction in schools and in the University as well;
  - the use of Tamil as the medium for Tamil candidates seeking admission into the public service.

( Can anyone envisage a situation where the Scottish or the Welsh in the U.K. would be educated through their mother tongues?)

- In 1966, regulations made under the above Act granted further safeguards to the Tamil language. Accordingly, Tamil was to be used -
- in the Northern and Eastern provinces for the transaction of all government and public business and the maintenance of public records in government offices;
  - for all correspondence between persons educated through the medium of Tamil and any official of the government.

- The Constitution of 1972 has made a positive contribution towards granting the Tamil language its rightful place. It provides for :
- the translation into Tamil of every law enacted by the National State Assembly;
  - the translation of all existing law into Tamil;
  - the submission of pleadings, applications, motions and petitions in Tamil and the participation in court proceedings in Tamil;
  - the provision of translation and interpretation facilities at court proceedings.

Today every official document - from a simple letter-heading to an important piece of legislation - carries a Tamil translation. The Department of Educational Publications which is in over-all charge of school text books has a well-manned section producing text books and translations in Tamil. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation gives very wide coverage to programmes in the Tamil language. Some statistics will not be out of place:

<u>Broadcasting Hours per week for 1973</u>		
	Sinhalese	Tamil
Channel 1 ...	57	52.5
Channel 2 ...	119	70

(Source: Dept. of Census and Statistics)

## Education

In the field of education the discontent must come not so much from the Tamils as from the Sinhalese villager whose child, more often than not, has to attend an overcrowded classroom in a ramshackle building. So far as schooling and education are concerned the Tamils are highly privileged - just the way they were in the colonial days. Consider, for example, the following figures showing admissions to the most sought-after faculties of the University (not forgetting that there is a Campus in Jaffna exclusively for the Tamils) :

<u>Year</u>	<u>Faculty</u>	<u>Sinhalese students</u>	<u>Tamil students</u>
1970/71	Engineering	85	62
	Medicine	132	101
	Science	362	174
1971/72	Engineering	171	95
	Medicine	124	87
	Science	604	207
1973	Engineering	201	67
	Medicine	250	94
	Science	442	186

(Source: National Council of Higher Education)

A major issue recently raised by the Tamils and some of the reporters of the English press in the U.K. is that 'Tamil students have to score more marks than their Sinhalese counterparts to gain admission to the University.' This is a most partial observation. The truth is that, in 1972, because of the varying standards of the educational facilities available in the different parts of Sri Lanka, a system of standardizing the marks was introduced. This was, by no means, a deliberate attempt to prevent Tamil students from entering the University. In fact, those affected by this policy included a large number of Sinhalese students attending well-established schools. After an inquiry by a Special Committee it was decided that the system be applied only to 30% of admissions. Thus 70% of admissions were based entirely on merit.

## Job Opportunities

One of the biggest problems created in the colonial era was the employment of an excessive number of Tamils in the public service even in those areas of the country where the population was predominantly Sinhalese. When the Tamil separatist groups complain of discrimination in the allocation of jobs, they are only trying to bring back the earlier situation where the Tamils had been given jobs quite out of proportion to their numbers. Even as late as the '70s the Tamils had (and still have) more than a fair share of jobs in the civil service. For example, in and after 1970, the post of Permanent Secretary (the highest rank in the civil service) in the following Ministries was held by a Tamil :

Defence and External Affairs

Constitutional Affairs

Irrigation, Power and Highways

Industries and Scientific Affairs

Public Administration, Home Affairs and Local Government.

Two other key Ministries - Education and Trade - had Tamils filling the post of Additional Permanent Secretary. During the same period the Attorney General was a Tamil. Even in the present Cabinet the Minister of Justice is a Tamil. It is indeed a pity that no newspaper reporter or TV producer in the U.K. ever cares to study these simple facts before rushing to the defence of the so-called Tamil freedom fighters.

## Other Civil Liberties

Every successive government in Sri Lanka since Independence has made a determined effort to respect and uphold minority rights. A fine example would be the concern shown for the religious traditions of the minorities. Given below is a list of public holidays declared on behalf of the minority groups. These holidays apply to the whole Island and are not limited to certain areas (as is the case in certain countries like Malaysia) :

Thaipongal (Hindu) Ramazan (Muslim) Mahasivaratri (Hindu)

Traditional New Year (Buddhist and Hindu) Deepavali (Hindu)

Good Friday (Christian) Id-ul-Azha (Muslim)

Milad-un-Nabi (Muslim) Christmas (Christian).

One wonders if any other multi-racial country in the world has had this type of consideration shown to its minorities. Can, for example, the Jews, the Hindus or the Muslims in the U.K. claim a single holiday on any of their important religious occasions?

### Tamil Caste System and Social Oppression

The hypocrisy of some of the Tamil politicians who shout about civil liberties can be shown by their own actions in Sri Lanka. They follow an extremely rigid caste system under which many depressed social groups are denied even their right to worship in a temple. One may recall the disgusting behaviour of a Tamil leader - C. Suntheralingam, one time Cabinet Minister and University Professor - who, in 1968, conducted an open campaign against a 'low caste' group of Hindus and prevented them from entering the Maviddapuram temple in Jaffna. Suntheralingam was prosecuted under the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act and was found guilty. It is well worth asking :

Who are the real violators of civil liberties in Sri Lanka?

Certain sections of the English media have sympathised with the Tamil 'cause' on three important matters : police killings of Tamil youths; distribution of land in Tamil areas among the Sinhalese; repatriation of Indian Tamils.

### Tamil Martyrs

The racist Tamil groups in the U.K. have attracted the attention of the media by posing as freedom fighters, socialists and martyrs. They claim that seven 'Tamil Muslims' were killed by the police. Apart from the lack of evidence to prove any kind of police brutality, there is also the question whether a MUSLIM who dies for some reason can be added on to a list of TAMIL martyrs!! The Tamil extremists in the U.K. have also tried to show the 'sacrifices' they made in the April '71 youth insurrection. Cf course, it is well known that not a single Tamil made any sacrifice at all in that movement. It is the Sinhalese youth who sacrificed their lives by the thousand. We are positively against any form of violent and anarchist movement aimed at destroying the democratic form of government in Sri Lanka. We only want to point out one solid truth : when it comes to anything Sinhalese or national, the loyalty and the allegiance of these Tamil extremists are with the Tamil Nadu in South India and never with Sri Lanka.

## Land Alienation

The claim made by the Tamils and, regrettably, by some British newspapers, that land owned by the Tamils is taken over by the State and re-distributed among the landless Sinhalese is utterly false. What actually happens is the alienation or distribution of CROWN LAND - i.e. land belonging to the State - under approved colonisation and village expansion schemes. These benefits are open to anyone eligible under the law governing the country's land policy.

## Repatriation of Indian Tamils

The reports about repatriating a section of the Indian plantation workers have been received with a certain degree of horror. The proposed repatriation scheme is, by no means, the type experienced by the Ugandan Asians. What has taken place in Sri Lanka is a process to solve the problem of the Indian Tamil (including a large number of illicit immigrants) in a most humane and practical way. Under the Indo-Ceylon Pact provision has been made for 300,000 (out of about 975,000) Indian Tamils to be granted Sri Lankan citizenship. India is to take back a total of 525,000, and the remaining 150,000 are to be absorbed in equal numbers by the two countries. As stated by Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, the former Minister of Plantation Industries :

" The working out to completion of the Indo-Ceylon Pact should effectively remove from the Sri Lanka scene the problem of citizenship of Indian immigrants generally and of the immigrant plantation workers in particular. It should result in this mass of workers being re-absorbed in the Parliamentary electoral process in Sri Lanka..."

(See : STATE Vol. 3, Colombo, 1975; p. 24)

## An Appeal

It is an irony that some Tamils have gone to the extent of comparing their situation with the system of apartheid in South Africa. There is, of course, a similarity : in South Africa the white minority enjoys all the privileges at the expense of the black majority; in Sri Lanka too, there is a privileged minority - the Tamils! We appeal to the Tamils and others not to be misguided by the racist propaganda of the T.U.L.F. and its followers. Let us not forget the tragedy of Biafra. All races have lived in harmony in Sri Lanka for many centuries. Do not let that harmony be destroyed by fanatics who are concerned only with political gain.

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Contact Secretary

89, தமிழர் தேசிய அமைச்சர் கழிமகன் 89, தமிழர் தேசிய அமைச்சர் கழிமகன் Ave

S.W. 11