

INDIA

September 1-15, 1981 Rs 4.00

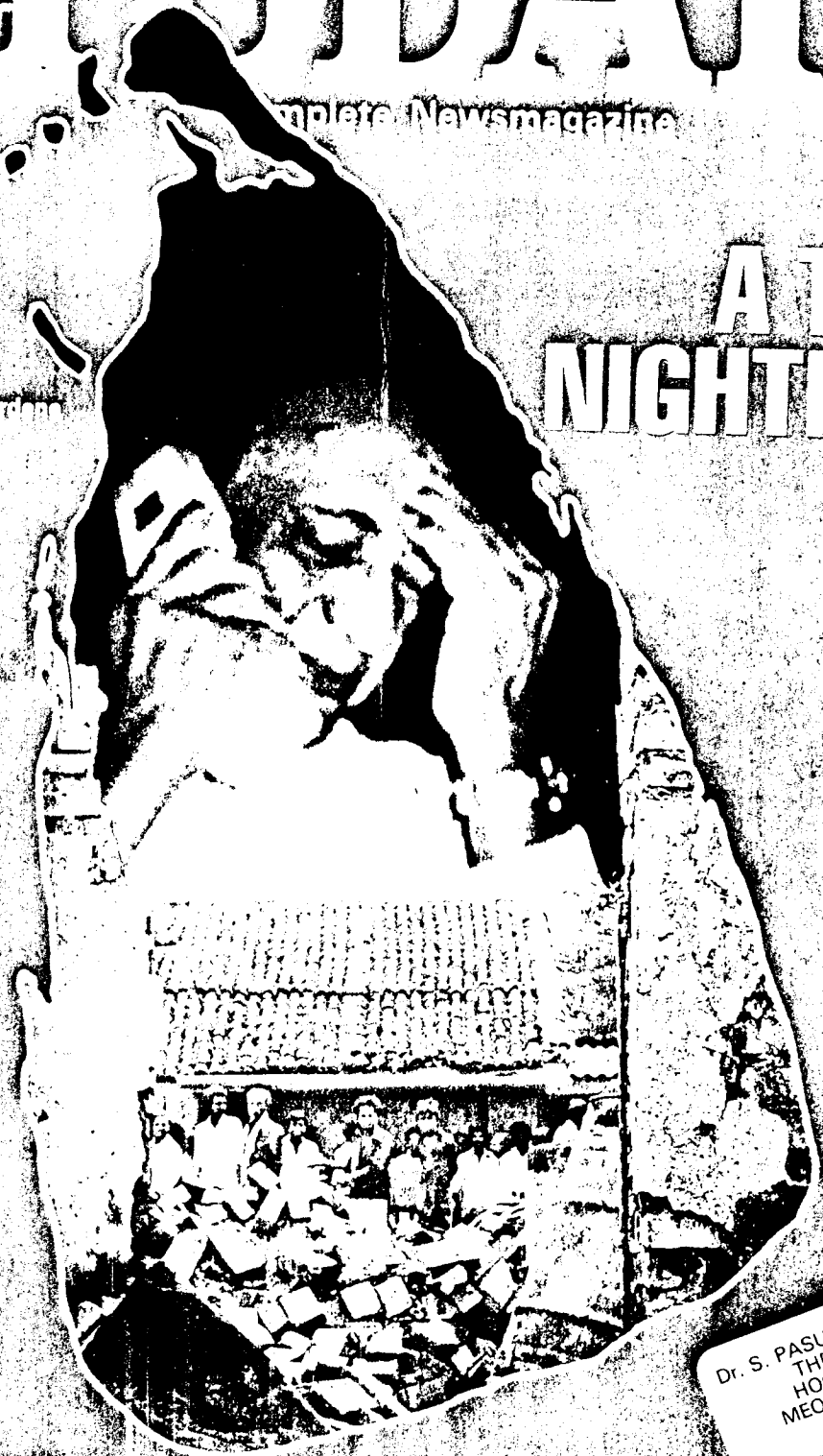
# TODAY

Complete Newsmagazine

SRI LANKA

## A TAMIL NIGHTMARE

President J.R. Jayewardene



Dr. S. PASUPATHY RAJAH  
 THE HAVEN  
 HOOK GREEN  
 MEOPHAM, KENT  
 DA13 0HX

ROUNDTABLE: INDIA AND THE BOMB

CONVERSIONS: MOUNTAIN OR MOLEHILL

# INDIA TODAY

The Complete Newsmagazine

Vol. VI. No. 17

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'India Today' 9-K Connaught Circus, New Delhi

110001-Phone: 351791/312477, Telex: 31-2651

THOM IN Cable: THOMSON PRESS

NEW DELHI

Subscription: 'India Today', Subscription

Department, Post Box 69, Faridabad, Haryana.

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Published by Raj K. Wadhwa for Living Media India

Private Limited, New Delhi and printed at

Thomson Press (India) Limited, Faridabad.

India Today does not accept responsibility for

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## Letter from the Editor

**T**HE journalist's path, more than in most professions, is strewn with a great variety of occupational hazards. Reporters have died in pursuit of the news. They've been incarcerated by repressive dictatorships or manipulated by ambitious media owners. But death and incarceration apart, nothing arouses latent anxiety more than the thought of running into difficulties in distant lands, far removed from the reassuring contact of a home environment. That has happened with journalists around the world as they've gone about in pursuit of news and stories. Last fortnight, in an event which made the headlines in the national press and figured in Parliament, that happened to Senior Editor S. VENKAT NARAYAN in Sri Lanka where he had gone to write this issue's cover story.

Narayan's assignment was a tricky one, to gain an understanding of the minority Tamil problem in India's southern neighbour and seek out the reasons for last fortnight's violence. Travelling beyond Ratnapura, about 100 km east of Colombo, Narayan and two Sri Lankan friends were taking pictures of Tamil shops looted and burnt in the small town of Pelmadulla when a crowd collected around them. Soon, a police sergeant and an assistant rushed across to ask what Narayan was doing. The sergeant apparently wasn't convinced by Narayan's explanation, chiefly because Narayan was on a day trip out of Colombo and had left his passport in the security of his hotel vault. The result was that at 2.45 p.m. he was taken to nearby Kahawatte police station where it took nearly four hours to record a statement in Sinhala. His cameras and tape-recorder were seized.

The sergeant then took off for Ratnapura 35 km away to make his report, and it was another two hours before the phone rang and the superintendent of police at Ratnapura ordered Narayan's release. Narayan's cameras and recorder were ordered to be returned to him, but four rolls of exposed films and three cassettes with interviews recorded on them were to be held back, and sent to Colombo. By then it was past 9.15 p.m., and the keeper of the safe had gone off to dinner. It wasn't till 11 p.m., eight hours after the sergeant picked him up, that Narayan was able to leave. But, the films, when they were returned to him had been rendered useless: they had been exposed to the sun to make sure no pictures of the damage to Tamil property made their way into INDIA TODAY.

Narayan relates a fitting finale to this Naipaul-esque story. At a cocktail party the night before he left Sri Lanka, an attractive woman asked him, "Did they put you in a dirty cell?" Replied Narayan. "Unfortunately they didn't!" She persisted, "Did they chain you?" He shook his head in reply. Finally, in exasperation she asked, "Didn't they even bash you up?" No, replied Narayan. "How unromantic!" she said, stomping off.

**I**N this issue, INDIA TODAY introduces a new feature called 'Roundtable' which will be published from time to time. It is meant to be a discussion among experts on topics of current interest. In this issue, six participants, including two members of Parliament, two military men and two journalists, assisted by one defence specialist as a resource person, participated in a discussion on 'India and the Bomb' chaired by Executive Editor RASHEED TALIB.

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Narayan outside the Parliament in Colombo

# Trouble In Paradise

**T** O successive Sri Lankan governments and the world at large they are collectively and euphemistically referred to as the island's "Tamil problem". For decades, the Tamil problem has simmered under the surface of Sri Lanka's idyllic outward calm like a long-festering sore. Last month, it erupted with savage suddenness in an orgy of mindless violence—the worst in recent Sri Lankan history. Arson, looting and wanton destruction, seemingly orchestrated with ruthless efficiency, exploded simultaneously in nearly 30 towns and villages in five of the country's nine provinces. During the week-long blitzkrieg, hundreds of houses owned by Tamilians were gutted and systematically looted by Sinhalese thugs; 17 Tamils, including a pilgrim from Tamil Nadu who was hacked to death in a barber's shop, were killed and four young Tamil women gang-raped.

The loss in terms of property destroyed

and looted ran into several million rupees but the violence had far more serious consequences. Thousands of Tamil plantation workers fled into nearby jungles or took refuge in Christian missionary convents to escape the attacks. Finally, after four days of uninterrupted violence, Sri Lankan President Junius R. Jayawardene gave in to desperate appeals by Tamil community leaders and ordered an island-wide Emergency for the second time since he came to power four years ago. By then, nearly 250 individual cases of arson and looting had been recorded and the violence had gouged deep and painful scars across picturesque Sri Lanka's troubled face.

**Ghost Town:** Ratnapura, the fabled city of gems 104 km south of Colombo, with a population of 35,000 last fortnight resembled a ghost town. The emerald green tea gardens still shimmered brightly in the tropical sun, but even from a distance the wisps of smoke that climbed into the sky

told their own grim tale. In just one explosive night, 31 shops, all but two owned by Tamils, were razed to the ground. The gems and other valuables looted from the shops were worth an estimated 20 million Sri Lanka rupees. But, the most worrying feature about the destruction was the highly organised manner in which the attacks were conducted.

In Ratnapura, an anonymous caller phoned the police and requested them to ensure the orderly running of a festival being held nearby. The police readily obliged without even asking the caller's name and sent almost the entire local force to the site. Hardly had the police left, when groups of youth arrived in buses and vans at Main Street, the city's shopping centre. Within minutes, responding to an unspoken command, they gathered in front of selected shops and started hurling petrol bombs inside the shops. Within an hour, their targets were smouldering heaps of rubble and the attackers

had vanished looking for similar targets. As soon as they left, looters moved into finish the job.

**Immediate Effect:** The effect of the attacks has been electric. None of the Tamil gem traders or shop owners are to be seen. "Most of them are Jaffna Tamils," explained a Sinhalese shopkeeper, "the minute they sensed danger, they fled". Mohan, the son of a Tamil gem trader, who lives in a village 10 km from Ratnapura is still dazed by the unprecedented violence that destroyed everything his family owned, in one mindless moment. According to Mohan, the attack on his family started with a group of Sinhalese youth screaming abuse at them and hurling stones at the house from a heap of conveniently placed rubble. His two sisters and parents slipped out through the backdoor into the house of a neighbour, S. Muthucumar. They then proceeded to the next house, belonging to a Sinhalese where they covered terrified in the toilet. Meanwhile, their own house was a blazing inferno. The hoodlums left and fairly soon commotion erupted in a nearby plantation. By next morning, all the Tamil plantation workers had fled into the jungle for safety. Said a dazed Mohan: "My parents and sisters have gone to live with relatives in Colombo. Our gem business is finished, our house is destroyed. Nobody will pay us compensation. How are we going to start life all over again?"

The ones who survived the attacks are no better off. They now live in constant terror and tension. Says Muthucumar a signals officer at Colombo's Ratmalana airport: "Everybody says that I must take my family and leave. But where can I go? I have invested all my money in building this house. This is the only place that I call home. I work in Colombo and I visit my family once a week. While I am away at work, I live in constant fear of my family's safety. The tension is too much. It's a nightmare."

**Indian Reaction:** In neighbouring India, the reaction to the wave of terrorism against Sri Lankan Tamils was sharp and spontaneous. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M. G. Ramachandran and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) chief, M. Karunanidhi battled each other to champion the cause of their "brethren" under siege in Sri Lanka. MGR, in immutable style, air dashed to Delhi to personally request Mrs. Indira Gandhi to take immediate steps to protect Tamils in Sri Lanka, while the DMK had to be content with staging massive street demonstrations in Madras.

Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu Assembly passed an all-party resolution urging the Indian Government to take the issue up to the United Nations a demand that was politely rejected by Foreign Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao on the grounds that it was

"purely an internal matter". An embattled Jayawardene echoed Rao's statement but more succinctly. "There is nothing they (the Indian Government) or anybody else can teach us about how to govern a country," he told INDIA TODAY last fortnight (see interview). But the target of the attacks, the Tamils, viewed it differently. Said A. Amirthalingum, 54, the fiery and articulate leader of the Opposition in Sri Lanka's Parliament: "As our neighbour, India has a moral obligation to see that human rights are granted, particularly when a substantial section of the people denied human rights are people of Indian origin." S. Sellasamy, general secretary of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, the most powerful plantation workers' trade union, voiced a different but widely accepted theory. "India seems reluctant to say anything for fear of being accused of interference", he said bitterly, "but the Sri Lankans think that New Delhi doesn't care for us, so they give us hell and get away with it."

**No Surprise:** Largely forgotten in the welter of accusations and counter-accusations was the knowledge that Sri Lanka's bloody August was no surprise to anyone in the island. Violence and tension have settled like a dark monsoon cloud over the island ever since last May, when a ruling party

candidate for Jaffna district development council was gunned down at an election meeting, allegedly by members of the Eelam Tigers, an extremist group that wants a separate Tamil nation through violent means. A week later, four policemen on duty at a Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) meeting were shot in the back by another group of Tigers. As a retaliatory measure, the police and the army struck back by burning the famous Jaffna Public Library the offices of the separatist TULF, the headquarters of the separatist TULF and the residence of V. Yogeswaran, a TULF MP suspected to be a Tigers supporter.

This was followed by an unprecedented no-confidence motion against Amirthalingum, who is also a prominent TULF leader, for making anti-national speeches abroad. During the heated debate in parliament, the leader of the Opposition was called a "liar, a traitor and a murderer who deserved to be hanged" by a leading government spokesman. Inflammatory speeches by the ruling United National Party (UNP) leaders added unnecessary fuel to the fire. Four days after the Parliament debate, the Tigers hit back with a midnight raid on a police station near Jaffna leaving two policemen dead. The attacks of retribution, mainly aimed at the police who are widely suspected of being



TULF MP, Yogeswaran, and wife in front of their burnt-out house: a planned attack

## SRI LANKA : WHERE TAMILS LIVE

CONCENTRATIONS OF TAMIL POPULATION

LESS THAN 30 %

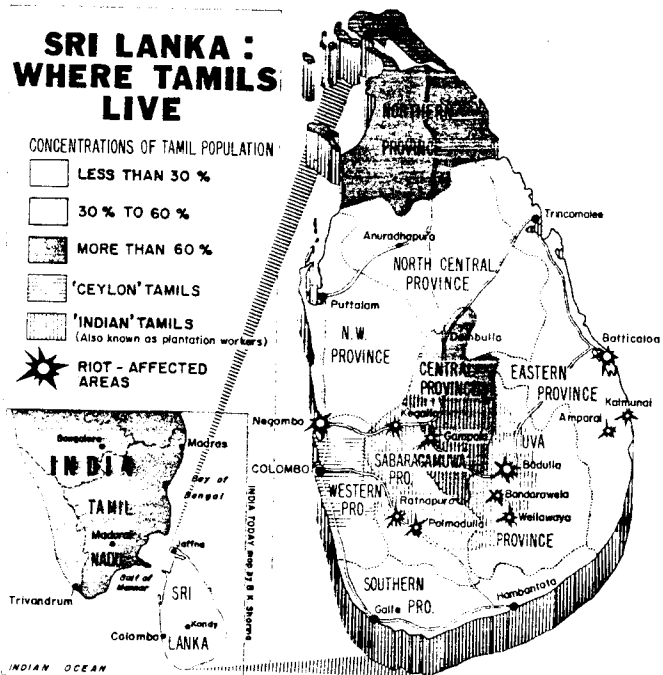
30 % TO 60 %

MORE THAN 60 %

'CEYLON' TAMILS

'INDIAN' TAMILS (Also known as plantation workers)

RIOT-AFFECTED AREAS



## Cover Story

sympathetic to anti-Tamil terrorists, only ceased when Jayawardene clamped down the Emergency.

**Deep Resentment:** In psychological terms, the violence unleashed against the Tamils goes far deeper than surface resentment. The average Sinhalese makes no distinction between Indian Tamils or Sinhalese Tamils. For them, both are aliens. A sad-eyed Sinhalese bearer at the beautiful Beluh Oya rest house near Balongoda, shook his head sorrowfully and said: "What is the meaning of all this arson and violence? We, the Sinhalese and Tamils, all came from India. We have lived together happily for so



An old woman stands before her burnt-out house: irretrievable losses

long. Why are we fighting now? Why are we so suspicious of each other?" Added a plump, well-fed Colombo editor, "The Tamils are by no means an oppressed community. They have enjoyed a lot of hospitality outside the north."

The Tamils, for their part, believe the opposite. "The Sinhalese believe they are Aryans who came from Bengal," says V. Sivandanan, director of *Eelamadu*, Jaffna's only Tamil newspaper. "They feel superior to the Tamils whom they contemptuously refer to as *chakkrivas* (scavengers) and *kallathomis*" (men who smuggled themselves into this country

J.R. Jayawardene

## "The TULF Began It All"

**F**OLLOWING his stunning electoral triumph four years ago and the overwhelming parliamentary majority that his United National Party (UNP) commands, Junius Richard Jayawardene, 75, had earned the enviable reputation of being one of the most stable heads of state in the volatile Indian Ocean region. By last fortnight, however, the austere, Sri Lankan President's political fortunes had taken a dramatic downswing in the wake of the recent orgy of violence that has convulsed the central part of the idyllic island. While the spark that ignited the violence was confined to the so-called "Tamil problem", a long-festering thorn in the Government's side, opposition to the UNP Government has been steadily snowballing in the wake of Jayawardene's efforts to arm himself with extra-constitutional powers in order to muzzle the powerful labour unions and bring the Tamil problem under control.

Despite the widespread feeling that he is currently riding an unpredictable tiger, Jayawardene was surprisingly relaxed and cheerful when he met INDIA TODAY'S Senior Editor S. VENKAT NARAYAN for an hour-long exclusive interview last week in his elegant official residence in Colombo. Dressed in his traditional spotless white cotton sarong and shirt, Jayawardene spoke frankly and at length on the factors and forces responsible for the current instability in Sri Lanka. Excerpts:

**Q. Your Excellency, the recent arson and looting in Ratnapura and other areas where plantation workers of Indian origin live has caused much damage to their lives and properties. What steps are you taking to instil confidence in the affected people?**

A. These disturbances arose as a result of the murder of over 20 police officials in Jaffna district. They were largely Sinhalese and some Tamils. This is the work of those whom we call terrorists. These terrorists have long been associated with the activities of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Some of them are members of the TULF. I personally do not think that the TULF leadership has anything to do with them now. But it takes a long time to erase the original idea from the minds of the public. The TULF, though they may not be associated with the terrorists, doesn't condemn or oppose these murderous activities in Parliament and in their utterances. If the TULF people openly say that they are against terrorism, and asso-

ciate themselves with the Government in nabbing the terrorists, this feeling of insecurity in the minds of the non-Jaffna people, people living south of Jaffna, will disappear. They will then believe that though the TULF is asking for separation, they will resort to only constitutional means and not to violence. Because there's this anti-TULF feeling and the TULF is associated with Tamil people good and bad certain elements, maybe criminals, maybe politicians, use that existing anti-Tamil feeling to create tension. We are doing our best to control the situation. Those who need our special protection are those in the plantations—citizens, non-citizens or the stateless. They are the most harmless people. They are members of unions which are supporting our government. That's why I cannot understand why anybody supporting the Government should try to harm people who are themselves supporting the Government. I think there is some anti-government movement behind this.

**Q. This has caused anxiety in India where there was a heated discussion in Parliament last week.**

A. I can understand the anxiety of India, but that anxiety should be for people wherever they attacked, not only in Sri Lanka. Just as much as we are anxious when people in India are subjected to communal violence, whether they be Muslims, Buddhists. But I feel the Indian Government should not show undue anxiety. In Sri Lanka it can be misunderstood. We do not like interference in our affairs and I feel our government is liberal, democratic and as humane as the Indian Government or any government in the world. There's nothing they can teach us or anybody can teach us about how to govern a country.

**Q. There has been some talk about the involvement of a foreign hand by some of your ministers. Do you believe that too?**

A. I can't say I believe or don't believe it. Terrorism is always international. We are investigating it.

**Q. You don't suspect the Indians by any chance?**

A. I am not suspecting anybody, least of all the Indians.

**Q. During the past week I have travelled in the affected areas and spoke with the people, Sinhalese as well as plantation workers. Some statements made by some of your ministers in Parliament appear to have contributed a great deal to the building up of tension in the affected areas. Do you approve of the racial tone of such statements by your ministers?**

A. Maybe they could have contributed but much less than what the TULF has contributed. The TULF people began it all by making provocative statements. If there wasn't that debate where a lot of steam was

let off, it is possible the Sinhalese might have erupted more. They were saying: What is the Government doing? What are the MPs doing?

**Q. One gets the impression that the 'Ceylon' Tamils as well as those of Indian origin suffer from a tremendous sense of insecurity. This is why they are agitated and are talking about a separate state.**

A. They have a sense of insecurity because they are talking about a separate state. If they give it up, all this will disappear.

**Q. They say that Tamils don't get jobs if they can't speak Sinhalese. They have problems getting admission to colleges. They say there's discrimination. So they are fed up and are very agitated. They say, 'we have been living here as long as the Sinhalese have been living. If we can't live in non-Tamil**

shoot the Sinhala police.

**Q. So you are saying that it's terrorism that is coming in the way of a settlement?**

A. I have done everything they want. Their complaint is non-implementation of what we have agreed to. But why don't they get together with us to implement things?

**Q. Whenever there's serious communal trouble in India, either the prime minister or one of her senior colleagues rushes to the spot to console the victims and to reassure them. Nothing of the kind seems to be happening here. Are you planning a visit to Ratnapura or Jaffna?**

A. I am thinking of doing that. I am trying to go there before leaving for Saudi Arabia next month.

**Q. In Jaffna people are very upset. The policemen set fire to the 50-year-old library and burnt 97,000 valuable books. They also set fire to a TULF MP's house.**

A. That's because they think he is in touch with the terrorists.

**Q. It seems they were trying to catch him so they could kill him.**

A. Terrorists do that too.

**Q. So it's tit for tat? This kind of situation is causing a lot of alienation. Therefore, if you go there and assure them of your concern for their safety, they may feel relieved. It may go a long way to ease the tension.**

A. I want to do that but I must find time. I don't want to go with so much security. If something happens, it will be worse.

**Q. I don't think the Eelam Tigers will try to get at you! Mahatma Gandhi whenever he visited areas of Hindu-Muslim riots, used to completely transform the atmosphere there. Your image is such that such visits will certainly help a great deal.**

A. I am trying to work it out.

**Q. The 15-year Indo-Sri Lanka agreement about repatriation of Tamil plantation labourers will expire in October this year. There are still over half a million stateless people here. What do you propose to do about them?**

A. We are discussing it at the official level.

**Q. Are you going to have another agreement?**

A. Yes, we have to have something like that.

**Q. How do you propose to run the plantations which entirely depend on Tamil labour if the plantation workers leave the area to go either to Jaffna or to India due to fear and insecurity?**

A. Those who are non-citizens can go back.

**Q. But after living here for five generations?**

A. Yes, they have to go back.

**Q. In the US, if a child is born on American territory, its mother too gets that country's citizenship.**

A. That may be so, but we have different citizenship laws here.

**Q. Mr Amrithalingum, the Leader of the Opposition, says the TULF has a mandate to fight for separation. He says it is up to your government to come up with proposals so that they can consider what to do.**

A. All the proposals are now being implemented.

**Q. Are you planning to ban the TULF?**

A. Not the TULF, but the Eelam group that is now in Tamil Nadu.

**Q. But the talk of Eelam is already illegal, isn't it?**

A. I think it is, under the Constitution, but we have not really taken it all that seriously.

**Q. Now you want to ban it or banish the people who talk about Eelam?**

A. I have not thought about it. I want to develop their consciousness. It has just started.

**Q. Has Mrs Gandhi been in touch with you about the recent troubles here?**

A. No, I don't write to her when there's communal trouble in India. It happens more often in India.

**Q. Do you think she has any clout with the Tamils here? Can she perhaps help mediate here?**

A. I don't think so.

**Q. You don't think she has a role to play?**

A. Nobody other than Sri Lankans have a role to play. But what help can she give?

**Q. Maybe, she can ask the TULF leadership not to push you hard on separation but to sit down and talk to settle their problems with you in a peaceful way.**

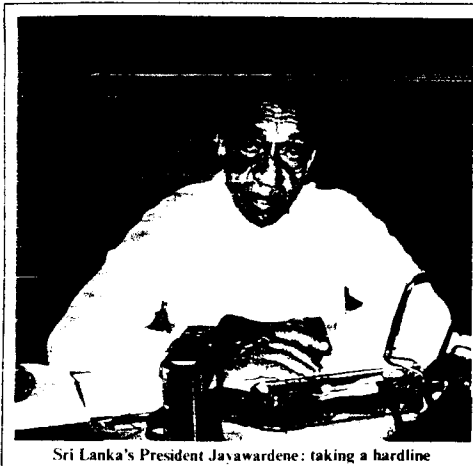
A. Oh, yes. Certainly it will be helpful. But I have not asked her for it.

**Q. If she offered to help on her own you won't consider it interference or something?**

A. I don't think they'll listen to her.

**Q. At Mrs Gandhi's level if she does something to help sort this out and asks her ally, the DMK leader Karunanidhi, not to encourage the talk of Eelam but to see how best the Tamil problem can be solved in a peaceful way, I am sure...**

A. Yes, yes. That will be a great help.

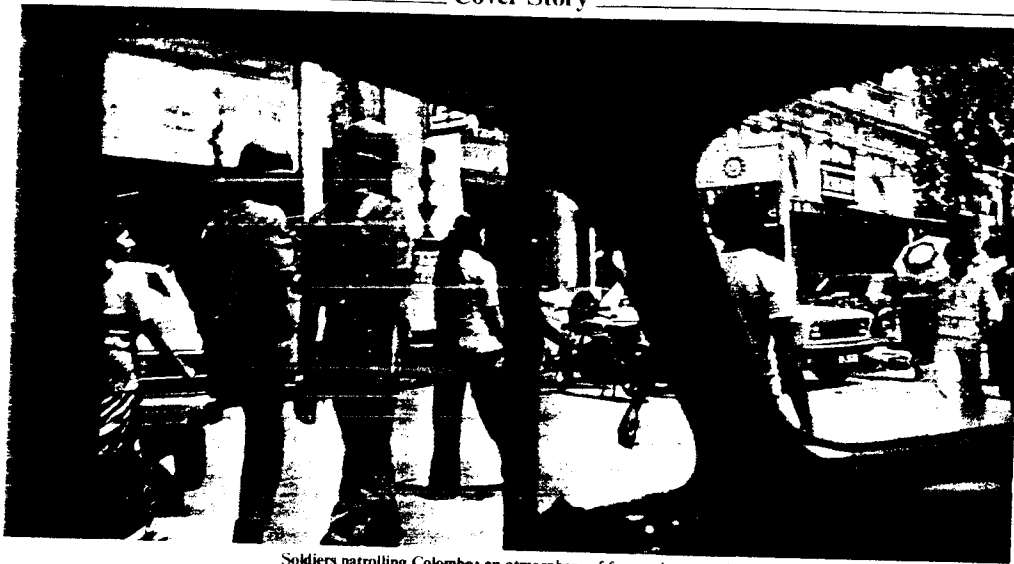


Sri Lanka's President Jayawardene: taking a headline

areas happily, let them give us autonomy so that we can live in our areas like Jaffna with happiness and without any discrimination."

A. The development councils will be implementing all this. You can't change things overnight by legislation. But a section of the TULF, which believes in terrorism, is opposed to the development councils. They murdered our chief candidate. They don't cooperate. Nobody tells us who did it. Why doesn't the TULF come forward and say they are for development councils? Their main grouse is that we are not implementing some of our decisions. Implementation takes time. We need TULF's cooperation. I can't go beyond the development councils. As long as there is terrorism, I don't think both sides can get together. Anytime we sign any agreement they go and

Cover Story



Soldiers patrolling Colombo: an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty

in boats). An equally important factor in the current hostility is the religious one. A majority of Sinhalese firmly believe that their island was created specially to preserve Buddhism. Buddhist monks play a crucial role in Sri Lankan politics and Sinhalese authors are constantly inspired by the ideal that Sri Lanka was made for the definite purpose of carrying the torch lit by Buddha. The Tamil problem really started in 1956 (Bandaranaike Sirimavo's late husband) came to power by promising to make Sinhalese the official language of Sri Lanka "within 24 hours." Bandaranaike fulfilled his electoral pledge.

**Language Problems:** When Sinhalese was made the national language, it was stipulated that all government job-seekers must be proficient in the language and those already employed in government and nationalised services had to learn the language within a certain period. As a result, the Tamils' share of government jobs nosedived from 50 per cent to 10 per cent over the next two decades, while in private sector jobs, their share slumped from 35 per cent to 15 per cent. Says S. Raveendran, 35, a Colombo lawyer who works for the Tamil Refugee Rehabilitation Organisation (TRRO): "In the name of giving the Sinhalese their due, successive governments kept snatching away the Tamils' rights and privileges and passed them on to the majority community, reducing us to second class citizens."

Over the years, the effect of that policy

has increased the frustration level of Sri Lankan Tamils to boiling point. Formerly, Tamils used to account for 65 per cent of admissions to medical, engineering and physics courses. In 1972, Sirimavo Bandaranaike's government introduced "standardisation" to enable less talented students from backward Sinhalese regions to get admission in specialised courses, even if they had lower marks than their Tamil counterparts. The result was that bright, talented Tamil youngsters were squeezed out of admissions and consequently decent jobs.

The Tamils were hit again when Mrs Bandaranaike introduced radical land reforms in the same year. Under the new reforms, estates were nationalised and excess land was distributed to landless Sinhalese which led to every fourth Tamil plantation worker being thrown out of his job. The communal violence that erupted in 1977 was a direct result of the Government's measures to appease the Sinhalese people at the cost of the Tamils. Over the past quarter century, bloody communal riots have flared up on half-a-dozen occasions.

In almost all the incidents, the Tamils were the ones who lost their lives, property, and, more important, their self-respect. "They (the Sinhalese) hate us," says an agriculture student from Jaffna at Paradiniya University, adding, "Of the 4,000 students, only 800 are Tamils. They taunt us all the time and we live in constant fear. They think all Tamils are Eelam Tigers. If they find us reading Tamil newspapers they snatch them

Sri Lanka Tamils

"We Belong Here"

**T**HE complexities of Sri Lanka's Tamil problem are a product of history—not only, as popular opinion has it, due to British colonial rule; they extend back into the dim dawn of recorded history. Three quarters of Sri Lanka's population of 15 million are Sinhalese Buddhists who are believed to have migrated to the pearl drop island more than 2,500 years ago from regions which are now parts of Bihar and Bengal. Joining them in the journey across the Paik Straits at that time were the first Tamil migrants who settled down, naturally enough, in the northern part of the island, closest to their one-time homeland. The "Ceylon Tamils", as they are today called, came from the Vellala and Kallan communities, and became owner cultivators, tenants and landless agricultural labourers numbering 1.87 million today.

Hundreds of years later, in the 19th and 20th centuries, they were joined by low caste Tamils from the Pallan, Paraiyan and Chakkiliyan communities, indentured labour imported by the British for the tea and rubber plantations of Sri Lanka. The new-comers were from districts such as Ramnad, Madurai, Sa-

away. It is humiliating."

**Chauvinistic Demand:** The tendency on the part of successive Sinhalese governments to succumb to chauvinistic demands has succeeded in alienating the Tamils more and more. These finally led to demands for autonomy for the Tamil-dominated north-eastern region on the Swiss, Canadian or Luxembourg model—a suggestion that has been rudely rejected. The reason is purely political. No Sinhalese party can hope to survive by catering to the Tamils, since, that would immediately anger the majority Sinhalese population. Consequently, the original demands for separate Tamil-dominated regions have now escalated into a demand for Tamil areas being made a separate state.

In 1972, several Tamil political parties banded together into a single national movement leading to the birth of the TTF, dedicated to fight for Tamil rights and political independence. An off-shoot of the TTF is the more militant youth who ganged together under the Eelam Tigers banner, a tightly-knit group that believes in achieving their goal of a Tamil homeland through violence. The strength of the Eelam is still unknown. After a series of daring bank robberies and murders of policemen and politicians, the Jayawardene government proscribed the



Buddhist monks: political force

movement in 1978.

The TTF, originally reluctant to adopt the Eelam slogan, has now adopted the idea and believe it is the only way they can survive as a separate entity. The turning point was in 1974 when police violence disrupted the World Tamil Research Conference in Jaffna killing nine people and in 1976, the party adopted Eelam as its official line.

The more enlightened Tamils in Sri Lanka are distrustful of Eelam but see it as the only way of achieving their ends. "We don't think it is the solution to our problems", says Raveendran, the articulate lawyer from Colombo, "we wish to live in this country with self-respect and dignity. But if we are harassed and humiliated we have no alternative but to subscribe to Eelam. We are against dismembering this beautiful country through Eelam but every self-respecting Tamil sees it as the only way."

**Unification:** Another major fall-out from Sinhalese chauvinism and the increasing insecurity of the Tamil population is the recent unification of the two distinct groups of Sri Lankan Tamils—the Ceylon Tamils, who have lived there for generations, and the Indian Tamils, mainly plantation workers, who are comparatively new arrivals. Originally separated by caste barriers—a legacy from

lem, Tirunelveli and Tiruchi and today the "Indian Tamils", as they are known, number 1.3 million.

When the country became free in 1948, the first independent government passed a law to deprive most estate labourers and their families of citizenship. Nehru's attitude to this was straightforward: the Tamils had been there five generations and they were the responsibility of the Sri Lanka government. But, after Nehru's death in 1964, Shastri signed the first agreement with Colombo, aimed at facilitating the transfer of an agreed number of Indian Tamils back to India. A decade later this was followed up by the pact between Mrs Gandhi and Mrs Bandaranaike. The two agreements together allowed for the repatriation of 600,000 Tamils to India. The Sirimavo-Indira pact as it came to be known expires next month.

**Dismal Failure:** Clearly, the agreement has been a dismal failure. So far, 273,000 people have been repatriated. Another 83,000 are awaiting repatriation while Sri Lanka granted citizenship to 156,000. There are nearly 600,000 whose fate hangs in the balance. Most Indian Tamils aren't willing to come to India; it is a country they don't know and don't feel much empathy for. "We were born here," said a young Tamil student in Balongoda echoing the widely held view,

"this is where we belong." And if conditions are peaceful, their lives and property not threatened, there is no doubt that they would prefer to stay on.

President Jayawardene's government is keen on signing another agreement with India (see interview). But several Indian Tamils interviewed across the island are reluctant to leave the land of their birth. Said Sreenivasagam, 21, who



Tamil plantation workers: mainstay of a sick industry

lives on a plantation in Kahawatte, one of the affected areas: "I don't know India. Why should I go there? My father was born here. So was my grandfather. If the Sinhalese make things difficult here, I would rather go to Jaffna or Trincomalee"—areas where the Ceylon Tamils live in a majority.

Tamils form 85 per cent of the labour on Sri Lanka plantations. Repatriation and desertions from plantations following communal riots in the past have begun to affect tea production. Economic difficulties and widespread unemployment amongst Sinhals coupled with resurgent Sinhala nationalism have apparently blurred the politicians' vision. They do not appear too worried about the plight of the already sick plantations if and when the Tamils leave them to make a home either in predominantly Tamil northern and eastern Sri Lanka or return to an uncertain future in an unfamiliar India.

Opinion among Tamils in Sri Lanka is not in favour of India signing another agreement for their repatriation. They think the earlier agreements were mistakes. "This is our home and this is where we belong. The politicians have no business to tinker with our futures," growled an angry young Tamil, Pudemaduilla. They seem determined to join hands with Ceylon Tamils to fight for their rights.



## Cover Story

their Indian past—they have, of late, started moving closer together. After each riot in the plantation areas, the Indian Tamils flee to the northern and eastern provinces where the Ceylon Tamils provide them shelter.

The plantation workers are the most vulnerable of Sri Lanka's Tamil community. Being forced to live in virtual isolation, they have developed a meek, subservient attitude and are unable to defend themselves as well as the Ceylon Tamils. Hundreds of plantation workers have fled to the relative safety of Jaffna and Trincomalee where the FRRO have resettled them on government-owned wastelands. They have been given implements to clear two-acre plots in the jungle for cultivation and material to build a hut, cooking utensils and wells for water. "At least this is one alternative to being forced to return

in this area thrice. We don't want to live here any more. I want to try and get a passport and get a job on a ship and go abroad, maybe to Italy." The more militant youngsters want to stay and fight. "We should fight these bastards who are looting our property and dishonouring our women folk. We are young and can face the consequences," says one Tamil youngster.

Inflation has only succeeded in fuelling the Tamil problem, specially among the plantation workers. A male worker earns Rs 10 a day and a woman earns Rs 8. But the cost of living has risen by 400 per cent since 1977 and inflation is currently raging at 40 per cent. Rice, the staple food in Sri Lanka, costs Rs 6 a kg, sugar Rs 17, and kerosene Rs 19 a gallon. Wage increases since nationalisation have made little or



Ciampa aiding riot victims: mercy mission

to India", says a FRRO worker.

One of the plantation victims is Kandaya Ponnuswamy, 50, a Sri Lanka-born school master at Wikiliya state plantation, who had escaped to a convent run by an Italian priest, Pio Ciampa at Balongoda. With tears trickling down his lined face, Ponnuswamy said: "I sent my wife and four children away to India in 1972 and I have been trying to follow them but the authorities say my pension papers are not ready yet. This time, they burnt my house, took away my belongings. I fled for my life with this old *lungi* and torn shirt and with two rupees in my pocket."

**Militant Youngsters:** There are other victims like Francis Patrick, 20, an ebony-fused youngster whose mother is a plantation worker, who would like to go, but not to India. Said Patrick: "I make a living by trading in gems. Recently, I was given Sri Lankan citizenship. I don't know why they gave it. I can't get a job. We have had trouble

no difference in the face of spiralling costs.

In the face of the economic and political squeeze, the cry for Eelam has acquired a desperate tone. The violence against the Tamils, which has been occurring with disturbing regularity every year since the USP came to power, has placed the Jayawardene government in an awkward position. Though determined to ignore the secessionist demands, the USP Government has made a number of concessions to the Tamil population. Tamil has been made a national language though Sinhalese continues to be the only official language. Citizenship laws have been amended so that Tamils are no longer treated as a separate (and inferior) group.

**Political Alliances:** But even so, it is doubtful whether the conciliatory moves will be enough to wipe out the inherent suspicion between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Like the Muslim vote in India, the Tamil vote can sway an election in a particular party's

## A Amrithalingum

## "Survival At Stake"

**T**HE leader of the Opposition in Sri Lanka's Parliament, Appapillai Amrithalingum, 54, represents the Vaddukoddai constituency in the Jaffna area. Bo ld and articulate, the lawyer-turned-politician is one of the most prominent leaders of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) which is demanding Eelam, a separate state for the island's Tamils who number 2.7 million and comprise 20 per cent of the population. Last fortnight, S. VENKAT NARAYAN met him in his native village Moolai, near Jaffna. Excerpts.

**Q. You have said that the Tamils are worse off under President Jayawardene than they were under Mrs Bandaranaike. How do you substantiate this claim?**

A. Under the new constitution he has given more language rights and other things than Mrs Bandaranaike, no doubt about that. But those rights have not been implemented. In the matter of employment in the public and semi-public sectors there has been gross discrimination against Tamils under Jayawardene's Government. During the four years, he has been in power, not even 2 per cent of jobs in this sector have been given to Tamils. The President admitted this. You can see how grave the situation is. Violence against Tamils all over the country has become almost a regular feature now, particularly since 1977. In Mrs Bandaranaike's time there was no communal violence against Tamils in the south. She ruled with emergency and violence of all types was kept under control. Since 1977, there has been communal violence four times. Every year it has been happening. In August 1977, we had widespread violence all over the country. Nearly 300 people were killed, about 10,000 Tamils were injured, about 50,000 came to the north and east as refugees, and over 200 Tamil women were raped. Property belonging to Tamils worth about a thousand million rupees or more was destroyed or looted. It happened again in 1978, 1979 and once again this time. It spread all over and I think in Ratnapura district alone about 10,000 workers have been affected. The damage to property and the attack on people this time has been more systematically planned. It was ruthlessly executed.

**Q. What do you think of the charge that some hawks in the Cabinet are actively involved in inciting the people by their communal speeches?**

A. I entirely agree. I am definitely of the view that the climate for all this violence was created by members of the Government. In fact the people who were driven out of the Ratnapura area say that it all started with speeches made by a woman minister and a Buddhist priest in that area a few days ago. They are hundred per cent certain that all the fellows who attacked were USP people. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) men did not interfere, according to them.

**Q. Have you come to accept the extremist view that Eelam is the only solution to this problem?**

A. For 25 years we put forward a federal solution but there was no response from the other side. Actually, it was police and army violence against our people at the World Tamil Research Conference in Jaffna in 1974 that was the turning point which altered the thinking of the Tamil people, that they cannot live with the Sinhalese any longer. And the idea grew in 1975. Ultimately in 1976, at a party convention, we took the decision that that was the only way we could survive as a separate entity. Apart from our rights, our very survival is at stake. The systematically planned colonisation of our areas with Sinhalese people has been carried out over the last 30 years to such an extent that we run the risk of being made a minority in our own areas, and if we become a minority we know what fate awaits us. If we are a minority here in Jaffna then we will have to jump into the sea, we will have no other place. That is our fate.

**Q. The President said in his manifesto that he would organise a round-table meet to discuss the Tamil problem. But he has not done so. Do you think, hawks like Industry Minister Cyril Mathew are coming in the way?**

A. I think it is partly because of resistance to the President's plans within his own Cabinet, and in his own party. They are not allowing him to do what he wants to do. But at the same time, as a politician he also has been making certain speeches which were calculated to rouse the Sinhalese. Jayawardene wants to satisfy both sections of his party. I think he has an eye on the next elections. So he must carry all sections with him. I think today Cyril Mathew and his group are very powerful in the Cabinet and in the country, so he will not like to go violently against them. Yet, I am hoping that we may be able to at least get over some of the harsher effects of the situation through him. He is the only person who can do something.

**Q. What would you accept short of Eelam?**

A. During the elections of 1977 we asked for a mandate from our people to work for the freedom of the Tamils by establishing their own state. We are not free to put forward any alternative to Eelam. But it is up to the Government to put forward alternatives. Whatever the Government is prepared to put forward, we are willing to consider and submit to our people. We are only too familiar with governments asking us for the minimum and it becomes the maximum. And then they beat down from that point, and we get nowhere. We get played out in the end. Though for 25 years we asked for a federal form of government, it was never seriously considered. This has at least made them sit



Amrithalingum: 'rights denied'

up and realise that they must find a solution to this problem.

**Q. How do you propose to achieve this through parliamentary means? The Tamils are concentrated in a few areas. How do you propose to persuade the 80 per cent Sinhalese to look at things your way?**

A. Not merely by agitation in Parliament, but by non-violent struggle outside. We will make it impossible for them to govern us in the way which they are seeking to do. After all they are not a mighty empire which can keep us down.

**Q. Have you ever discussed your problems with Mrs Gandhi?**

A. I met Mrs Gandhi two or three times and placed the problems faced by the Sri Lanka Tamils before her.

**Q. What did she say?**

A. She understands our problems.

Of course, I can't expect her as the head of a neighbouring country to interfere in Sri Lanka's internal affairs. I said to her that India should understand and sympathise with us. If things go beyond our endurance, if we are repressed to an extent that our very right to live as human beings is in danger, India is the only country which can raise its voice on our behalf. Because, we are tied to India by ties of language, religion; emotionally we have much in common with India. All our thinking is conditioned by thinking in India.

**Q. Was she sympathetic to your point of view?**

A. I think more than any other leader she understands and sympathises with us.

**Q. What do you think India should and can do to help without giving the impression that she is intervening in the internal affairs of another sovereign country?**

A. Lately, India has begun, through diplomatic channels, to bring pressure on the Sri Lanka Government with regard to our problem. This was not there in the past. If they keep up what they are doing now, things ought to be better.

**Q. Do you think India's offer to mediate with the Sri Lanka Government and suggest to it to be more sympathetic to the Tamils could be misinterpreted as intervention here?**

A. Many countries take up the cause of the Palestinians or of the blacks in South Africa; they apply sanctions for the rights of the blacks in South Africa. If one looks at it narrowly, it is an internal problem in South Africa. The problem of the blacks in Zimbabwe was an internal problem but the world didn't close its eyes to that. They felt that where human rights are denied it is a matter for the world to interfere and to see that human rights are granted. As our neighbour, India has a moral obligation to see that human rights are granted, particularly when a substantial section of the people denied human rights are people of recent Indian origin.

**Q. Are you suggesting that the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka is similar to that of the blacks in South Africa and the Palestinians who are fighting for a homeland of their own?**

A. Yes, very much so. We had our own homeland in this country, our own government, our own kingdom; for the first time the British unified the entire country. Now, in the name of independence and democracy, power has gone into the hands of the Sinhalese and they are using that power to deny all our rights.

## Cover Story

## Repatriates

## Not Quite The Promised Land

WITH the sea lapping on both its sides, Mandapam camp is a beautiful spot off the east coast of India with only a bridge separating it from Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu. It could have been an ideal beach resort. But for the 750 Indian families that are repatriated from Sri Lanka every week, life in this transit camp is, to say the least, miserable. They come to start life anew in a country they had not regarded as their own till 1964. They come with visions of a "golden India", as the Sri Lanka officials describe it. But they cannot even find the proverbial silver lining in the dark clouds that gather over their lives in the months to follow. Their plight makes the recent uproar by Tamil Nadu politicians for their "suffering Tamilian brethren" in Sri Lanka seem hollow.

Statistics are deceptively impressive. According to the Tamil Nadu revenue department 90,099 families totalling 3.63 lakh people have been repatriated to India so far and all of them have been "satisfactorily rehabilitated". But according to P.R. Armugham, the 53-year-old greying vice-president of the United Front Federation of Repatriates (UFFR), an association formed in 1977 to help repatriates: "Most of us are working in professions that are totally foreign to us and we are unhappy. We don't earn as much as we used to do in Lanka. Government loans and assistance are never given without harassment. If we could we would rather go back to Lanka where we lived better lives."

Most of the repatriates were plantation labourers working in tea, rubber and cardamom estates in various parts of Sri Lanka. When they land in Rameswaram port, which is a three-hour ship journey from Sri Lanka, they are sent to the two transit camps at Mandapam and Tiruchi, 250 km away. The transit camps are placed under charge of the special deputy collector for rehabilitation. Repatriates who bring in more than Rs 10,000 in cash are not entitled to stay in the camps but asked to proceed to any part of India they choose. If they need loan assistance they can go to the Repatriate Bank in Madras.

**Expenditure:** Persons whose savings do not exceed Rs 10,000 but is more than Rs 5,000 are allowed to stay in these camps and in case no job has been allotted to them they are entitled to a loan of Rs 6,000 to

start a business or the same amount to buy agricultural land. In addition a housing loan of Rs 6,000 is distributed for urban areas and Rs 3,000 for rural areas. Those bringing in less than Rs 5,000 are not only entitled to all these loans but also get cash dots of Rs 8.15 per head every week and rationed rice at 57 paise a kg, till they are rehabilitated. For the aged a weekly pension of Rs 25 is given for the rest of their lives. This year alone the Tamil Nadu Government has spent Rs 66 lakh for rehabilitating repatriates since April. The Central Government reimburses the amount at the end of every financial year.

On the face of it these welfare schemes are laudatory. But a visit to the sprawling 360-acre Mandapam camp reveals an entirely different picture. The 750 tiled roof huts are in a dilapidated condition. Formerly a quarantine camp under British rule, many of the huts do not have doors and windows and the people are subjected to a strong chilling breeze every night. There has been no electricity supply for the past three years and the repatriates are forced to use oil lamps. Each family whether consisting of four or 10 members is crammed into a shabby room, the size of a normal bathroom. Latrines are common and the repatriates complain that sanitary conditions are terrible. A government cooperative store supplies most of their daily necessities. The only saving grace is a 20-bed hospital and a school run by a private organisation.

Trouble begins for the repatriates as soon as they land. Sharks are always around to dupe them. Promising them immediate job placements and housing facilities they take all their savings and disappear. Recently one of them, who had taken 77 repatriates for a ride, was nabbed by the police. Although a sub-inspector and two constables accompany them in the train from Rameswaram to Mandapam camp, gangs of robbers wait for an opportunity to steal their belongings when their attention is diverted. When they move into the camps, their houses are frequently burgled because of the shabby doors. Two sections of people, smugglers and businessmen, are having a field day ever since repatriates started pouring into the country from 1964. As the repatriates are interested in making a quick buck, tape-recorders and expensive cloth material are given to them by agents in Sri Lanka to be delivered to their contact men in Rameswaram and they are paid for their services. As the repatriates are allowed to bring in any "utility" goods duty free to India but only have to list them out when they leave Sri Lanka, most of the time they

get away with whatever they smuggle in and: Rameswaram has now become a smugglers' den.

**Unscrupulous Practices:** Sri Lanka businessmen have learnt a unique technique to get more Indian money for a Lanka rupee. The official exchange rate is one Sri Lanka rupee for 43 Indian paise. But under the Sirimavo-Shastri pact the exchange rate was frozen for repatriates at 74 paise for each Lanka rupee. Unscrupulous businessmen give between Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000 to repatriates to carry over to the other side at a commission of Rs 10 for each hundred. What the repatriates don't realise until they land in India is that this money is accounted as their savings and they are deprived of many of the government schemes



A repatriate family camp hutment: "only we know our suffering"

when they cross the Rs 5,000 or Rs 10,000 limit. Many of them were rendered homeless because the officials refused shelter as their savings exceeded the limit.

But more importantly the repatriates have run into plenty of trouble while applying for the loans. Revenue officials boast that they are given loans within a week but according to K. Mani, a UFFR committee member: "It not only takes a minimum of two months to get a loan but unless the lower staff are tipped, files will not move. We are completely at their mercy and they exploit us." Armugham himself was a victim of deliberate bureaucratic delay. Although he came here in 1973, he finally got his agricultural loan only in 1977. To his ill luck there have been no rains in the district in which he bought his land for the past four years

and now his family is near starvation. Purshottam, a repatriate tailor, is another example. He wanted to start a business originally in Trichur, Kerala. But when he applied for a loan officials said he had to collect it from the Kerala revenue division. Finding it a problem, he opted for Tamil Nadu. At first, revenue officials flatly refused. But after a year of repeated representation to the Central Government he finally got his loan. But his children's education has been seriously affected. Said a disgusted Purshottam, 47, who used to earn Rs 1,000 a month in Lanka: "I have borrowed so much money while waiting for the loan that it will take me a life time to return it."

Finding employment in plantations and textile mills is a never ending problem.

Government has been showing so much concern for their "Tamil brethren" in Sri Lanka, treatment to their repatriate brethren is shockingly indifferent. When the Gandhigram Trust, an autonomous service institution, tried to purchase land in Adilakshminarayana village near Madurai to rehabilitate 45 families staying at the Tiruchi camp, their efforts failed for the strangest reason: As the 45 repatriated families were Harijans the village folk protested and saw to it that the land was finally allotted in the Gandhigram premises.

But revenue officials are totally satisfied by the rehabilitation work they have been doing. Said an outspoken N.R. Koteeswaran, deputy collector of rehabilitation for the Mandapam camp: "We

favour. Currently, the TULF has an understanding with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and other opposition parties to oppose some of the UNP Government's policies. But what shape this fragile alliance will assume at the time of elections is anybody's guess.

Indian Tamil votes contributed largely to the UNP's massive victory in the last elections in 1977 but their support cannot be taken for granted any longer. Jayawardene's economic policies have clearly not achieved their desired objectives. The Free Trade Zone, the Mahaveli Project and the new capital scheme have failed to create enough jobs for the growing unemployed in the island. Salaried people are incensed at the cuts that were ordered by the UNP in the massive subsidies they have enjoyed all these years.

Meanwhile Industry Minister Cyril Mathew is trying desperately to gain short-term popularity among the Sinhalese population by making anti-Tamil speeches and he has ambitions to take over from Prime Minister R. Premadasa in the next elections. But if Mathew pushes his hawk-like views any harder it is certain to result in more anti-Tamil violence.

All Tamils feel that India can play a mediatory role without necessarily creating the impression of meddling in another country's internal affairs. According to most observers, the Tamil problem is not an insoluble one and can be resolved by peaceful methods. All that is required is a certain amount of give and take on both sides coupled with political tact and sagacity.

**India's Silence:** But India's stubborn silence is being misinterpreted as indifference, even as weakness and inability. Sri Lanka, despite its proximity and the fact that the current tension involves people of Indian origin, does not appear to figure prominently in South Block's scheme of things. Paradoxically, both Sinhalese and Tamils hold Mrs Gandhi in high esteem and any personal intervention on her part will hardly exacerbate the situation, and, in fact, both Jayawardene and Amrithalingum are not averse to Mrs Gandhi mediating to solve the Tamil problem. But at the moment, Mrs Gandhi and the policy-makers in South Block are more concerned with Pakistan and China and the country's internal problems.

The Tamils in Sri Lanka, judging by the Indian Government's reaction, will have to fight their own battles. That, in the current tension-filled situation in Sri Lanka, is only likely to push the Tamils closer to the wall. The present stalemate can only be broken by two alternatives: peaceful compromise through mediation by a third party, like India; or, a violent confrontation that will dismember the island and scar it forever. Tragically the current mood, both in Sri Lanka and New Delhi, favours the latter.

S. VENKAT SARKIS in Colombo

Though they are earmarked for certain jobs before they leave Sri Lanka, repatriates have to stay in Mandapam for more than six months without earning a paisa before they are given the jobs. Thirty families who were to be employed in a Tamil Nadu mill have been waiting for the past eight months without any result. Nor are the repatriates happy with the employment they get. Revenue officials admit that hundreds of families have returned to the camp complaining that the salary they were being paid was too low. Said 24-year-old Subramaniam, who was employed in a textile mill but returned: "I used to earn Rs 1,000 in Lanka. But here I am paid only three rupees a day out of which I spend two rupees on bus fare itself. How can I survive?"

**Indifference:** While the Tamil Nadu

are giving them the best of facilities here and the repatriates have no room for complaint." He dismissed the allegation that bribes had to be paid for securing loans as "totally false" and maintained that loans were paid out within a week without causing any discomfort to the repatriates. "So far not one of the repatriates has complained to me that he had to bribe," Koteeswaran claimed. He said most of the repatriates were happy with the jobs the Government had secured for them. But repatriates dismiss Koteeswaran's claims as "bogus". Said Armugham: "Only we know how much we are suffering." For the repatriates "golden India" has turned out to be nothing more than base metal manufactured by bureaucratic alchemists.

—RAJ CHENGAPPA in Mandapam camp