

Ethno-Cultural Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Case Study


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Abstract

Since its independence, Sri Lanka has seen an escalating ethno-cultural conflict between the Buddhist Sinhalese, the most populous ethnic group, and the Hindu Tamils, the largest ethnic minority. It, therefore, presents a classic example of a nation deeply divided by cleavages of ethnic heritage, religious affiliation, language, and habitat. In light of these assumptions and realities, the paper examines the cultural dimension of Tamil separatism and theorizes that the separatist movement is animated not only by concerns about Tamil prospects in the Sinhala-dominated state of Sri Lanka but also by the profound pride that Tamils take in their cultural tradition. Sri Lankan Tamil separatism, however, also raises the specter that conservative Jaffa Vellalars might dominate an independent Tamil state. Thus, reform-minded Sri Lankan Tamils must consider such implications against the ominous trends towards violence and geographic polarization of Sri Lanka's two conflicting ethnic communities.

Introduction

The years since Sri Lanka became independent have witnessed the gradual deterioration of relation between the Island's most populous ethnic community, the predominantly Buddhist Sinhala folk, and its largest ethnic

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minority, the Sri Lankan Tamils, who are mainly Saivite Hindu. The latter have dwelt for at least 700 years, and perhaps as long as one millennium, in their homelands in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese, who comprise over 70 percent of the population, dominate in the verdant southwestern region of the island country, while the Sri Lankan Tamils, who comprise 11 percent, dwell in two regions, the arid Jaffna District of the extreme north and the eastern coastal littoral. The worsening relations between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamil communities exemplified in communal riots present us with a classic example of the conflict-ridden population, deeply divided by cleavages of ethnic heritage, religious affiliation, language, and separate habitats. So profound and obdurate are these cleavages that the country's unity would seem tenuous at best.

The Issue

However strong the separatist movement might be, it is clear that the separatist cause is encouraged by a widespread fear among Sri Lankan Tamils that continued Sinhala domination will eventually eradicate not only the civil rights of Sri Lankan Tamils, but also their unique cultural tradition. This paper examines the cultural dimension of Tamil separatism and theorizes with arguments that the separatist drive is animated not only by concerns about Sri Lanka Tamil prospects in the Sinhala-dominated state, but also by the profound pride that Sri Lankan Tamils take in their cultural tradition.

The Goal

This rationalization is based on the first-hand knowledge of the country where the first author was born and lived first as a student and then as a journalist for several years in the Southwestern regional that is Sinhala. This participant-observation is supported by some experts' findings in the fields as presented here.

Some Sri Lankan Tamils preserve ancient Tamil values and custom better than the traditions of Tamils elsewhere, and for that reason there are few Sri Lankan Tamils who do not feel at least some responsibility to protect them. And yet, for more than a few of them, that pride is tinged with ambivalence. The traditions that they wish to preserve are redolent of the ancient patterns of caste and regional discrimination favoring the powerful and conservative *Vellalar* caste of Jaffna, a caste that has for centuries dominated the political and economic affairs of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka. While Tamil separatists by no means aim to renew the

ancient forms of Vellalar predominance, it is nonetheless true that the cultural conservatism that helps to justify the separatist drive is insidiously tied to the legacy of Vellalar domination. For those sections of the Tamil community are concerned not only with Sinhala domination but also with social reform: the conservation implicit in the cultural dimension of the separatist drive cannot fail to raise vexing questions about the role low caste and other marginal groups would play in a Vellalar-dominated state.

Tamil Separatism

The rise of mass political participation has played no small role in the worsening relations between the two communities and in the rise of Tamil separatism, for the electorate is overwhelmingly Sinhala in ethnic identity and Buddhist in religion. In consequence, it has responded to political parties stressing issues of interest to Sinhalese Buddhists. Political movements addressing the nationalist and employment aspiration of Sinhalese Buddhists elected governments that in 1956, created legislation establishing Sinhala as the country's sole official language, and in 1972 wrote a new constitution mandating state protection and assistance for the Buddhist religion.

During the past 40 years, the Tamil folk of Sri Lanka have increasingly come to fear that their civil rights and their culture face extinction in Sri Lanka. In May 1976, a coalition of Sri Lankan Tamil political parties, namely, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), issued a resolution charging that the Sinhala-dominated government of Sri Lanka, and particularly the Constitution of 1972, aimed to "deprive the Tamils of their territory, language, citizenship, economic life, opportunities of employment and education, thereby destroying all the attributes of nationhood of Tamil people." The resolution called for the establishment of the "free, sovereign, secular and socialist State of Tamil *Eelam*" (country) to "safeguard the very existence of the Tamils in the country."

An Intransigent Position

Studies of Tamil separatism show that bread-and-butter issues -- employment in government service, access to university education, and problems in communications with Sinhala-speaking government officials -- have played a decisive role in the increasingly intransigent Tamil position. Sri Lankan Tamils complain bitterly of discrimination; job opportunities and university admissions for Tamils

have been severely curtailed by government quotas, notwithstanding the high aspirations for jobs and education among hard-pressed Tamil youth (Robeth Kearney, 1978).

Zeal for the separatist cause has reached its peak among the Liberation Tigers, a terrorist group allegedly composed of Tamil youths who could not be restrained by the older Tamil separatists.

Spokesmen for the separatist cause insist that they hope for a negotiated, non-violent settlement, but the Liberation Tigers pursue their aims by slaying policemen and Tamil leaders who are seen to collaborate with the Sinhala-dominated government. The consequences of terrorist activities in Jaffna, real or rumored, have been disastrous for the past 19 years. The repeated accounts given by the international media make us to infer that among Tamil youths are persons who believe there is no future for them in the present system of government.

Ethno-Cultural Dimension

Bread-and-butter issues have clearly exacerbated the separatist drive, but it is also clear that there is a more fundamental issue that animates the separatist drive. Sri Lankan Tamils deem themselves to be a unique people, set apart in their customs and their heritage from the Tamil people of South India (S. Arasarathnam, 1967). What Sri Lankan Tamils fear is not just the continuing decline of economic opportunities, but also the eventual extinction of their culture, which they regard as unique. Those in the Jaffna Peninsula particularly see themselves as preserving -- far more than the Tamil folk in mainland Tamilnadu -- the very essence of Tamil civilization. And the separatist drive is fueled in part by the sense of responsibility that Sri Lankan Tamils feel to protect those ancient traditions.

Sri Lankan Tamils have not seriously considered unification with the Indian mainland, where millions of Tamils reside in the ancient heartland of their civilization. Believing that they have no real connections with the mainland, Sri Lankan Tamils have long insisted on their uniqueness. To explain this view, most scholars have depicted Sri Lankan Tamil culture as marginal to that of Tamil South India, since it is said to show distinctive patterns because of early Malabar (Kerala) migrations and long interaction with Sinhala people (Kearney, *op. cit.*; Arasarathnam in E. R. Leach (ed.), 1960).

Tamil Civilization

The Malabar influence is thought to be evident in Jaffna's systems of dowry and inheritance, but anthropological research has questioned that interpretation, (Michael Banks, 1960). To be sure, there are aspects of Sri Lankan Tamil culture -- costume and fence styles, to name two -- that do indeed recall Kerala traditions, and without doubt much in Sri Lankan Tamil culture is shared with the Sinhalese South (S.J. Tambiah, 1973). But to portray Sri Lankan Tamil culture as marginal to the South Indian tradition, as if it were poised in a zone between the centers of two civilizations, is to miss entirely the very nature of the Sri Lankan Tamil identity.

Sri Lankan Tamils deem the mainland to have undergone such drastic social change that only they continue to adhere to the ancient patterns of social relations that constitute Tamil civilization. Among these patterns are the assiduous concern for female chastity, esteem for Brahmans and the generous support of temple priests, and the equation of a region's excellence with that of its particular land-holding caste (David Dean Shulman, 1980).

These patterns are indeed very old in Tamil civilization, and there is more than a grain of truth in the Sri Lankan Tamils' prideful claim that they preserve them best. Yet not all their regions preserve them with equal enthusiasm. On the whole, it is felt among them that the culture of the Jaffna Peninsula best preserves the ancient ways, and in consequence, it is in Jaffna that the sense of Tamil distinctiveness and the fear of cultural extinction is the greatest (B. Pfaffenberger, 1980). Jaffna's extreme social and religious conservatism is well known to the Sri Lankans, who regard it as far and away a region of the island most addicted to tradition. East Coast Tamils and especially those of the Tamil district of Colombo are far less rigorous in their observance of the minutiae of custom. Now this is not to say that East Coast Tamils and Colombo Tamils are any less proud of the Sri Lankan Tamils preservation of ancient Tamil ways. On the contrary, when asked whether those ways, such as the customs relevant to female chastity, are valuable, Sri Lankan Tamils are very likely to respond that these customs constitute civility itself, even if they do not observe them with the rigor characteristics of Jaffna.

The Sri Lankan Tamils' pride in their culture's preservation of tradition nonetheless carries with it, for not a few of them, a certain ambivalence. While nearly all Sri Lankan Tamils believe that their tradition is worth preserving, and indeed must be defended at all costs, it is nonetheless true that its constitutive traits are very closely related to the continued predominance of a traditional form of domi-

nation, that wielded by the landholding caste of the Jaffna Peninsula. The Vellalar caste exemplifies the Indian pattern of the decisively dominant caste, one that has through numerical predominance seized nearly complete control of a region's land, economy, political affairs, educational opportunities, and jobs. Jaffna is the only region of Tamil Sri Lanka that is so dominated, the other Tamil regions (such as the East Coast) being politically fragmented by contest between rival castes. In consequence of their decisive dominance in Jaffna and the availability of superior educational facilities there, which Vellalars have nearly monopolized, Vellalars have emerged all along as the religious, political, and economic leaders not only of Jaffna but of the whole Sri Lankan Tamil community.

The customs that Tamil separatists feel so much responsibility to preserve are ones that very few Sri Lankan Tamils reject, but at the same time they figure directly in the ideological and social foundations of Vellalar supremacy in the Jaffna Peninsula and refer, moreover, to Vellalar suzerainty in the most ancient form. That the rhetoric of the separatist drive is couched in the language of cultural preservation cannot fail, therefore, both to appeal to Sri Lanka Tamil pride and to raise concerns about the fate of non-Vellalar Sri Lanka Tamil minorities, such as the East Coast Tamils and Jaffna's many Untouchables, in a state that doubtless would be controlled by Vellalar leaders. For those sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil community desiring not only freedom from Sinhala domination but also genuine social reform, the call for a separate Tamil state is at once animating and troubling.

Tamil Tradition in Sri Lanka

One of the most ancient and characteristic themes of Tamil culture is the enormous value placed on female chastity (*katpu*), a notion that entails a variety of customary patterns, absolute premarital chastity, chaperoning, female imitation rituals, and the construction of a house to serve as a fortress against the intrusion of strangers. The maintenance of a girl's honor is thought to be essential to the status of her family and caste. But the notion is also saturated with the deepest religious meaning. A woman is seen to possess a supernatural power, so long as she remains chaste, a virgin before marriage and a faithful wife later; she will bring her family a milieu of fertility, power, good fortune, and joy (B. Pfaffenberger, 1980). As Jaffna Tamils of respectable caste understand their civilization, its great value was in discovering the truth of a woman's power, and in laying down the social and ritual rules (*muraikal*) by which a happy, prosperous, and dignified life can be led.

Implicit in these beliefs is the most profound anti-primitivism, or the conviction that the state of nature is miserable indeed. The failure to observe the ancient rules opens families to a legion of hostile, supernatural forces, which destroy fertility, erase happiness, cause illness, and fuel animosities. The result of ignorance is, in the Jaffna Tamil view, hunger, sadness, sickness, and fighting, as well as a low level of civilization.

Self-Discrimination

Jaffna Tamils extend the equation of unchastity and uncivility to Sinhala people, who are likewise thought to exemplify the pitfalls of a more easygoing sexual life. In the Tamil view, Sinhala people appear to be very easily angered and potentially violent, a character trait that, in Tamil ethnophysiology, is thought to stem from a lack of sexual and ritual diligence. What is more, Jaffna Tamils believe very firmly that the other Tamil-speaking groups of the island -- the Tamil -- speaking Muslims, the so-called Indian Tamils of the central highlands, and the East Coast Tamils -- are also less diligent than Jaffna Tamils in keeping up the ancient ways, and on this account Jaffna folk rank them lower and refuse to marry them. Because of their alleged lack of diligence in ritual, East Coast Muslims and Hindus alike are thought to have access to dark and polluting supernatural forces, and are greatly feared as sorcerers. A Jaffna Tamil traveling to the East Coast is advised to speak very courteously to everyone, lest he inspire anger and elicit a curse.

The Jaffna concern for female chastity and ritual diligence doubtless recalls the ancient values of Tamil culture, but it is probably true as well that the peninsula's unique history has played a role in affirming its contemporary importance. Jaffna was the center of a very concerned missionary effort, which in the nineteenth century threatened to overwhelm the Hindu religion with a tide of Christian conversion (K. Arumainayagam, 1976). The missionaries, who were on the whole extremely puritanical and ethnocentric, sought to portray the Hindu religion as a depraved tradition of foul superstitions, sensual orgies, and obscene sculptures. Appropriating their viewpoint and reinterpreting it in line with Tamil notions, the Hindu reformers, led by their champion, Arumuha Navalar (1833-1870), tried to reassert the value of Hinduism by cleansing Jaffna customs of the alleged obscenities and elevating to a supreme status the value and rites of female chastity.

Few Sri Lankan Tamils dispute the religious value attached to chastity, for that value has become irretrievably tied to the polemic defense of all that is glorious and ancient in Saivism. And yet it is also true that the value plays a crucial role

in the near-supremacy of the Vellalars caste in Jaffna ranking. Vellalars advertise the virtue of their women with stout, fenced houses and a remarkable variety of rites, all aimed at sustaining a woman's power. But to claim a high rank on these grounds requires no small wealth, not only to build the houses and sponsor the rites, but also to dispense with the earning power of women outside the home. Because Vellalars control virtually all of the peninsula's land, jobs, educational opportunities, political offices, and foreign exchange remittance, many of the poorest castes are hardly able to sustain the appearance of chastity, which they themselves esteem. The association is driven home in everyday economic activity, for Vellalars prefer to hire Untouchable women in their rice fields and for gathering fodder, thus ensuring the common Jaffna vista of unchaperoned Untouchable women walking about in public. The chastity value is disputed by no one, but it is nonetheless a value tinged with the reality of Vellalar domination (Kenneth David, 1980).

Another element of Jaffna culture with ancient roots in Tamil civilization is the alliance of Vellalars with Brahmans (temple priests). So characteristic is this of the Tamil way that South Indian historians portray it as a hallmark trait of the last millennium. The alliance, as it has been understood, permits Vellalars -- a caste whose status in orthodox Hindu terms should not be all that high -- to achieve (by virtue of the entitlement they receive from Brahmans-sponsored rituals) a very high rank indeed. In Jaffna, Vellalars still accord to Brahmans the deference they traditionally receive in South India. And it is precisely on this account that Jaffna Tamils hold themselves apart from Tamils elsewhere, both in Sri Lanka and in India. Seeing themselves surrounded, on the one hand, by other Sri Lankan Tamil groups that never emphasized the alliance, and on the other hand, by South Indian Tamils who seem to have abandoned it, Jaffna Tamils have convinced themselves that only they maintain this old Tamil custom.

Few Sri Lankan Tamils dispute the value of the Brahman's high position, or what is more, the religious conservatism that it entails. It is, nonetheless, a value saturated once again with the reality and the traditions of Vellalar domination. Vellalars support Brahmans, and in return receive from them, in public rituals, sanctified gifts that establish the Vellalars in the eyes of the village community as persons saturated with good fortune, the capacity to manage agrarian reproduction, and the right to command the services of non-Vellalar castes. In no small measure as a result of their traditional, ritual relation with Brahmans, Jaffna Vellalars regard themselves as the masters of Jaffna believing that the other castes lived there at their sufferance and for their convenience. They view the traditional social system of Jaffna as similar to the European medieval system, with Vellalars as the

feudal chieftains surrounded by their slaves and retainers. Vellalars tend to suppose that the whole social system of Jaffna is centered and focused on Vellalars.

To be sure, there are many Vellalars, including the predominantly liberal leadership of the Sri Lankan Tamil political parties, who genuinely favor social reform to end caste-based discrimination, but Jaffna is without doubt the one region of Sri Lanka where the old, hierarchical ideology of caste relations is still very widespread. To preserve the status of Brahmans, then, is a laudable goal that few Sri Lankan Tamils, even of the more liberal persuasion, can reject, and yet the customs of the Brahman-Vellalar ritual relation figure very prominently in the aristocratic demeanor of Vellalars. In short, the value placed on Brahmans and their temples is certainly one of the hallmarks of Sri Lankan Tamil pride and cultural distinction, but it is, once again, a value that inevitably raises the issue of Vellalar domination.

Conclusion

The cultural dimension of Sri Lankan Tamil separatism is, in conclusion, fraught with notions of identity that at once celebrate Sri Lankan Tamil cultural distinctiveness and raise the specter that conservative Jaffna Vellalars might dominate the independent state. It is possible, to be sure, to speak of the Sri Lankan Tamil identity in terms that encompasses all Sri Lankan Tamils, for very few of them dispute the religious conservatism and traditionalism shown in the esteem for female chastity, for Brahmans, and for the legacy of the precolonial Jaffna state. And yet these values are redolent of the religious and political foundations of Vellalar victory. But the problem nonetheless remains that the cultural dimension of Tamil separatism, which celebrates the cultural distinction of Sri Lankan Tamils on grounds of their religious and political conservatism, is hardly likely to carry an immediate appeal to those sections of the Tamil community who desire social reform and regional autonomy, even in the face of the manifold inequities that all Tamil folks conceive themselves to suffer under the Sinhala -- dominated regime. What remains to be seen is whether the ambivalence reform-minded Sri Lankan Tamils feel about the separatist cause will continue to outweigh the ominous trends towards violence and toward geographic polarization as members of the two communities find it increasingly impossible to live and to work outside of their own community's home regions.

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