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ENEMY LINES

WARFARE, CHILDHOOD, AND PLAY IN BATTICALOA

MARGARET TRAWICK

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CHAPTER 2

The Past

Some Metaphors

It is not the aim of this book to explain or make sense of the war in Sri Lanka.¹ Many millions of words have been written on this topic by people more knowledgeable than I. For me, this war is a context in which certain aspects of being human are illuminated in unique combinations of lights. Sri Lanka has been called a laboratory for the study of ethnic conflict, but it is not that for me. In a laboratory, conditions are controlled. In Sri Lanka, they are not. The violence in Sri Lanka, at the magnitude and intensity it has maintained for more than twenty years, is a severe affliction upon the people who make up Sri Lankan society, most of all the poor of all regions and all ethnicities. I would like to think this book may somehow ameliorate that affliction, but I know better than to expect such an outcome. I do not intend to make any prescriptions.

The aim of this book is to examine childhood, warfare, and play, as related and intersecting states of being, in the context of Batticaloa and Paduvankarai during the most intense phase of the Sri Lankan conflict so far. But the ramifications of the small, local events recounted in the ethnographic chapters of this book will not be evident to general readers in the absence of some description of how the overall war is configured.

Such a description cannot refer only to the actions of people in a closely circumscribed locality and period of time. In that sense, it cannot be purely ethnographic. It must be historical, shown as emerging from long social processes, patterns, and habits, to be understood in something

like the way the parties to the conflict understand it. Chronologically ordered chains of cause and effect, however, are not what this chapter is about. History is not the same thing as what happened in the past. History includes only the events that get recorded and the records that receive later attention. And these records are not mirrors of events; they are interpretations. Records from a thousand years ago may receive more attention from people in the present, and be much more influential, than records from an intervening period. To the extent that it is read and heard by people in the present, a historical document is a thing existing in the present; and in this chapter I treat historical documents that way. The ones to which I devote the most attention are among the ones best known by the parties to the current conflict. On the foundation of such documents, both ancient and recent, they build their arguments for continuing the struggle.

My description in this chapter is a compilation and digest of information from multiple sources. None of the information or interpretation is original. I have put the description in my own words to give it coherence. Some of my own thoughts are added; I have dwelt at length on details that I believe are of special significance in the present moment, and I have only touched on certain historical eras to which whole books have been devoted. Rather than focusing on political economy and assuming this to be the foundation of all warfare, I focus on ideology, because I believe that the current war in Sri Lanka is principally a war of ideology. I do not like to label this conflict an “ethnic” war: that is too simple a concept, and very misleading. But it is also certainly not a class war; it is not a war between different ways of life (such as farming versus herding, or agriculture versus industry); and it is not primarily a war over resources, although the question of who controls what resources is obviously of great importance, as it always has been. Much as I would like to say that the war in Sri Lanka is strictly a modern phenomenon, having no deep roots, I am no longer persuaded that this is the case. There are deep roots. These roots have nothing to do with one “tribe” in conflict with another, still less with one “civilization” versus another. They have to do with a habit of intellectual, emotional, and physical struggle over issues profound and trivial, funny and deadly, that human beings engage in. They have to do with tortuous streams of thought, and long, multistranded threads of conversation and argument drifting over time from one topic to another, seemingly unrelated one, merging and diverging, with early participants wandering out and new participants wandering in. Sometimes these threads get caught together and snarled into knots.

One way to imagine the war in Sri Lanka, then, is as a giant knot made of many smaller knots, all tangled together and pulled tight. Efforts to untie the knot create new knots that get pulled into the whole. Simplified representations do not help, and cutting the knot is not an option, as the entire society has become inseparable from the knot that binds it. By “cutting the knot” I do not mean partitioning of the island into two or more sovereign states. This is in principle an option, but in practice it is not possible at present because of the powerful voices demanding that all the people of the island live under one strong central government. The resistance to devolution of power is a tightening force. Such a force is not good or evil in itself: it is merely an intrinsic and intractable part of the knot. Once someone has attained a level of power, such as control or the illusion of control over a whole country, they will be unwilling, and indeed unable, to relinquish it. It must be wrested from them. The need for control in frightening and unpredictable times adds ferocity to the insistence on nondevolution of power and maintenance of central control, or some facsimile of control, on the island. But even more powerful forces than the need for central control pull against the tightening, most importantly the human need to be free of subjugation, humiliation, impoverishment, separation from loved people and places, murder, torture, and predation. Last but not least is the vital importance to individuals and local communities of control over the circumstances of their own lives. The smaller knots that have been drawn into the larger one are petty personal quarrels and feuds, fights over resources, and the delusions of power, pride, and raw greed.

A more abstract way of imagining the conflict in Sri Lanka is to posit that it is historically overdetermined. An event is historically overdetermined if it has several contributing causes, any one of which could have led to the event or something much like it. Rather than causes, one might more accurately speak of historical vectors or forces, including intentional human movements with specific goals. A single vector may split into two or more vectors traveling in different directions, and two or more vectors may merge into one. If it is possible to speak of turbulence in the interaction of vectors, then the war may be considered a site of giant turbulence, a storm.

This storm broke in July 1983. A newcomer to the study of Sri Lanka must learn this first of all. The Tamil Tigers up to that moment were a small band of young men who used guns and explosives to register their views. They had few civilian supporters. Then one night they blew up a government military vehicle in Jaffna, killing nineteen soldiers. Word of

the event reached Colombo. Cries, falsely proclaiming, “The Tigers are coming [here, to Colombo]” hit the streets. Crowds panicked. Every Tamil person was suddenly not just under suspicion of being a Tiger but convicted immediately of being a dangerous monster. Hundreds of ordinary Tamil civilians were massacred by gangs of Sinhalese men. The victims were cut down with knives and machetes, beaten to death with clubs or slabs of concrete, or doused in kerosene and burned alive. The violence spread to the hill country, where, as in Colombo, Tamils lived and worked among Sinhalese. Some of the killers carried voter lists indicating which houses were Tamil — thus some acts of anti-Tamil destruction were probably planned in advance.² But the madness went beyond whatever may have been centrally planned. Individuals took advantage of the chaos to rob, batter or destroy their own real or perceived enemies. Mobs coalesced. “The rioters were the denizens of downtown: men in sarongs; youths in trousers; women in skirts, saris, or traditional wraps; bureaucrats in office clothes; some white-hair elders.” Such mobs of people from all walks of life converged upon groups of Tamils and killed them.³ When the killers saw people on the road, they murdered anyone, rich or poor, man, woman, or child, whom they determined (by speech or identity cards) to be Tamil. Police assisted in the anti-Tamil violence, or stood idly by. In addition to the destruction of life, millions of dollars worth of property owned by Tamils — homes, stores, hotels, and industries — went up in flames.⁴

The events of July 1983 were not the first manifestation of violence against Tamils in which the government was complicit, but they were the worst. The mobsters, looters, and killers were not representative of Sinhala society as a whole. But they prevailed, and there was no organized protection against them.

Before July 1983, both Tamils and Sinhalese thought of their country as a civilized place. Afterward, most Sinhalese went into denial about the enormity of what had happened. Some expressed the view that the Tamils had it coming. And Tamils who had previously been pacifists — from middle-class professionals and wealthy traders to landless laborers — decided that war against the Sri Lankan government was the only option left to them if they wanted to be free of Sinhala domination and its accompanying horrors. They mobilized their physical, material and intellectual resources toward this end. The conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government has been raging ever since.

To understand how and why this storm broke and how and why it has followed this particular course, one must consider myriad factors. Here

I describe just a few of the features that constitute Sinhala and Tamil cultures and try to indicate the roles they have played in the current war.

Ancient History

The first human beings set foot on the land now called Sri Lanka perhaps as early as fifty thousand years ago. Recent evidence suggests that India may have been settled first from the south, instead of from the north, as was previously assumed.⁵ Thus the island of Lanka may have been settled many millennia before *Homo sapiens sapiens* ventured into central and northern India. Even if the first human settlers came from the north, it is certain that the people of Lanka and southern India raised their children, became familiar with the landscape, the flora and fauna, and developed their cultures, their technologies, their languages, their arts, and their spirits and minds long before anyone spoke of Siva or Buddha or Tamil or Sinhala or Sanskrit.

The earliest written inscriptions known from that area were created only about two and a half thousand years ago. But before written history, there would have been many waves of migration into and through the island, which is accessible by coastal sea routes from the Arabian peninsula and Southeast Asia and from the Indian mainland. Since its first settlement so long ago, the island has always been awash in the currents of the wide world.

Language, Religion, and Myth

LANGUAGE

The main difference between Sinhala and Tamil people is that they speak different languages. This difference is not trivial. The language you know structures the world you see and feel as real. If you know more than one language, you know more than one world. If you do not, you may have difficulty accepting that your way of understanding the world is not the only valid way. More Sinhalese and Tamils know English than know each other's languages. Few Sinhalese are motivated to learn Tamil. Some urban Tamils take the trouble to learn at least spoken Sinhalese, in large part to facilitate their getting along in a country where Sinhalese-speaking people constitute a majority.

The majority of Tamil-speaking people live not in Sri Lanka but in southern India. There are also old Tamil communities in Malaysia, Fiji, Mauritius, and other places. More recent Tamil communities, collectively called the Tamil diaspora, have developed in Western countries. There are presently about seventy million Tamil speakers in the world. There are only about ten million Sinhalese, of whom the great majority live in Sri Lanka.

The origins of the Sinhala language are enshrined in legend. The word *Sinhala* (*sīhala* in Pali) means “people of the lion.” The first written use of this word as a name for the island or the people on it came in the chronicles *Dīpavāmsa* and *Mahāvāmsa* of the fourth to fifth centuries A.D. The *Mahāvāmsa* traces the descent of the Sinhala people to a lion, hence their name.

Linguistic evidence suggests that the Sinhala language is related to the languages of central India. Hence the Sinhala language, together with north and central Indian languages generally, may be ultimately derived from Sanskrit, in combination with other, more local languages. It is said that the Sinhala language is remarkably homogeneous throughout the island — that is, relatively free of dialect variation — perhaps partly because the Sinhala nationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries entailed the promotion of “pure” Sinhala.⁶ (There was a pure-Tamil movement among Tamils also). The pure-Sinhala movement, like the pure-Tamil movement, never caught on among the masses, but it did result in a standardized orthography and grammar for written Sinhalese. Because a large proportion of Sinhalese people are literate and educated, the standardization of the written language would have conduced to reduction in dialect variation throughout the island. Literacy and standardization of forms in turn allowed the development of what Benedict Anderson calls print nationalism.⁷ “From 1860 to 1900, there were hundreds of Sinhala newspapers and periodicals. After that, it became thousands.”⁸

The Tamil language and the people who speak it have no mythological origin. Tamil is one of a group of languages spoken in southern India known as Dravidian languages. These are grammatically and phonetically distinct from languages spoken in the north but very similar to one another. Analysis of inscriptions from the Indus Valley civilization of 2500 B.C. indicates that the people there spoke some kind of proto-Dravidian language. This evidence does not necessarily contradict the theory that the first South Asian settlers came from the south, or that Dravidian languages originated there. To the best of modern historical knowledge,

Tamil-speaking people have lived in southern India for as long as there have been Tamil-speaking people. It is not unlikely that they settled in Lanka, together with any other peoples already there, before writing was introduced to the area. Inscriptional evidence puts Tamil Buddhist monks on the island of Lanka from the early centuries A.D.

The earliest extant Tamil literature is called Sangam literature because it is believed to have arisen from academies or gatherings (*sangam*) of scholars and poets. Extant Sangam literature is dated from about the first through about the fifth century A.D. Most Sangam literature consists of collections of short poems about either love or war. This poetry is naturalistic and humanistic in tone and usually bears no overt religious agenda. Features of the natural landscape, together with small but telling details of daily human, animal, and plant life, are woven into the poetry to indicate different emotional moods.⁹

RELIGION

Religious differences among Tamils and Sinhalese are more complicated than linguistic differences: in popular practice there is no sharp line between Sinhala religion and Tamil religion. Most Sinhalese subscribe to a variant of Theravada Buddhism currently called Sinhala Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is based on early Buddhist texts written in Pali. It includes the idea that only a monk following the path of the Buddha can achieve spiritual liberation. Laypeople can improve their karma in various ways, including by feeding monks; but without joining the *sangha* (the community of monks), they cannot attain enlightenment. Theravada keeps itself separate from Mahayana Buddhism, which developed about eight hundred years after the life and death of the Buddha. According to Mahayana teachings, you do not have to be a monk to achieve spiritual liberation. They also raise the bar of spiritual achievement: the highest level of enlightenment is not *arhat* (someone who has achieved personal liberation) but *bodhisattva* (someone who refuses to be free until all other creatures are free and who works for the liberation of others from suffering). Mahayana supplanted Theravada in India and thence spread north to Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan. Theravada persists in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Buddhism was supplanted in India by Islam, in conjunction with other religious forces: Saivism (the worship of Siva), Vaishnavism (the worship of Vishnu), and Christianity. Sri Lanka is therefore now geographically isolated from other predominantly Buddhist countries.

Tamil people practice any religion they want or none at all. Most Sri Lankan Tamils who have religion are either Saivas or Christians (some Catholics, some Protestants). Sri Lankan Muslims are the second-largest minority after Tamils. They speak Tamil at home and among themselves, but they do not consider themselves ethnic Tamils. They are descended from Arab traders who came first to southwestern India and later settled in eastern Lanka, marrying local women. In India, Tamil-speaking Muslims consider themselves to be culturally both Tamil and Muslim.

Sinhala Buddhist religious history is entirely confined to the island of Sri Lanka, and little is known about indigenous island religion before the Buddhist chronicles. Sri Lankan Tamil religious history is merged with South Indian religious history. The latter in turn developed continuously from local indigenous religious practices to participation in pan-South Asian religious practices, stories, and philosophies.

From about the eighth century A.D., fierce verbal and sometimes physical feuds among Buddhists, Jains, Saivas, and Vaishnavas in southern India took place. These feuds roughly coincided with the rise of religious devotionalism (Tamil *pattu*; Sanskrit *bhakti*) in southern India and the flowering of many kinds of devotional poetry.

The word *devotion* does not entirely capture the meaning of *pattu* or *bhakti*. It is passionate and total, agonizing and struggle-ridden, ego-annihilating devotion. All the Tamil religions, including Christianity as practiced in the Tamil countries, contain an element of *pattu*. The philosophical idea behind the religious practice of *pattu/bhakti* is that the natural human emotions can be a vehicle for spiritual liberation and dissolution of self into the divine. This idea was alien to ascetic philosophies, which taught that the passions are enemies and obstacles on the path to spiritual release. Buddhism taught that there is no eternal self or soul (*ātmā*), nor is there an eternal God. This idea too was anathema to those for whom the whole aim of life was personal devotion to a personal god, an eternal bond between the soul of the worshipper and the soul of the god. One can see how South Indian theologians, in the mode of academics today, could get into nasty disputes and even come to blows over which approach was correct.

Mahayana Buddhism developed through the thought of the great philosopher Nagarjuna, who lived in southern India during the second or third century A.D. One can see in Mahayana a reconciliation between the insistent passionlessness of Theravada Buddhism and the passionate devotionalism of Tamil *pattu*.

Liberation in Buddhist thought consists in the realization that noth-

ing exists in itself: everything we experience as enduringly real is only a construct, a temporary conglomeration of other things. The knowledge that all creatures are ephemeral constructs with no real existence in themselves should, logically, disable all feeling for them. One cannot have feeling for something one knows to be an illusion. For instance, when one awakens from a dream containing an illusory lover, one's passion for that lover dissolves. Nevertheless, in Mahayana, compassion for creatures is, paradoxically, equivalent to ultimate knowledge in the person of the *bodhisattva*, the "truly enlightened," who postpones his or her own extinction and release from the world in order to stay and save other creatures, including of course human beings, from the suffering of sentient existence. The motivation for this stay is not reason but compassion, or love, a natural human sentiment.

Buddhism flourished in southern India alongside other religions for a number of centuries before being scattered and absorbed by non-Buddhist religious institutions there and eventually disappearing from India altogether. Mahayana Buddhism became "corrupted" (in the view of some scholars) by *pattu/bhakti*. People came to believe that all they had to do to be saved was call out to the Bodhisattva to save them. After all, the Bodhisattva remained among sentient beings only to save them. The Bodhisattva is the manifestation of purest love. An individual person therefore does not need to go through all the mental exercises prescribed by early Buddhism to attain enlightenment: one need only trust in the love of the Bodhisattva and one will be saved, depart this world of suffering, and be born again into a perfect and heavenly world — the closest thing to nirvana that ordinary people were thought capable of imagining.¹⁰

Pattu-enraptured Buddhism, though it disappeared from India, resurfaced in China in the form of devotion to the female *bodhisattva* Kwan Yin, who remains the favorite deity of the Chinese people. Kwan Yin, like the *pattu*-inspiring deities of South India, is available to anyone who calls her, regardless of rank or social station.

It is generally accepted that Buddhism first came to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Asoka in northern India in the third century B.C. — three centuries after the life of the Buddha. This was before Mahayana schools of thought arose, but there were already bitter disagreements among different groups of Buddhists. Asoka was a powerful proponent of Buddhism who sought to restore peace among the disagreeing factions and promoted the spread of the religion throughout South Asia.

The earliest extant Lankan Buddhist texts, the *Dīpavāmsa* and the *Mahāvāmsa*, were composed in Pali between the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. The *Dīpavāmsa* is considered a crude early chronicle; the *Mahāvāmsa*

is said to be more coherent and is more frequently cited in teaching and debate. Modern Sinhala Buddhist nationalists think of the *Mahāvāmsa* as a sacred text.

MYTH

The *Mahāvāmsa* recounts the genealogies and lives of the first Buddhist kings on the island. It also describes the mythological origin of the Sinhala people. The *Mahāvāmsa* makes it clear that Sinhala Lankan kings were from the start immoral people. Even though they were willed by the Buddha to be protectors of Buddhism on the island, their behavior was in violation of everything Buddhism stands for. Thus the chroniclers demonstrate to readers that they have taken on, or been assigned (we don't know which), an impossible task: to marry the Buddhist religion to the history of kingship on the island. They could have portrayed the kings as exemplars of virtue, but they chose the opposite route. Perhaps (again, we will never know) the chroniclers were warning their readers that this marriage would lead to trouble. And in fact it has, in the modern age. The current conflict is exacerbated by, or might even not have happened without, this marriage.

The very first story of the Sinhala people tells us that their originating ancestors, who were savage troublemakers before they arrived on the island, became civilizing proponents of Buddhism after they entered the island. Vijaya, the eldest grandson of a lion and an amorous princess, is of evil conduct, and so is expelled with his followers to sea. They land on an island from which they are expelled, as before, for troublemaking. Then they arrive on the island of Lanka.

The *Mahāvāmsa* contains exciting war stories about the conquering Buddhist kings. The most famous of the Sinhala warrior kings is Duttagamani, who is fated before he is born to make war against Damilas (the Sinhala name for Tamils), defeat the Tamil king Elara, and unify the island so that “the doctrine [of Buddhism] will shine brightly.” Defeating and killing Elara becomes an obsession with him.

Elara is not represented as evil. He shows compassion for the smallest creature and is fanatically evenhanded. He also shows a unique propensity for self-sacrifice. His *tapas* — the intensity of his self-punishment — is so powerful that it overcomes the whole hierarchy of supernatural authorities, including Buddha, in whom Elara does not even believe; and in this way he gets his desire, which is for the rain to fall at just the right times and places in his kingdom.

Elara is destined to be killed so that dharma will prevail. His killer is

the violent and headstrong Duttagamani. Against the will of his parents, Duttagamani goes to war first against his loyal brother, and then against the righteous Elara. In a great battle, Duttagamani defeats Elara's armies and kills Elara. He immediately builds a monument honoring Elara and commands that the monument be kept as a place of worship forever.

After the great battle is over, Duttagamani grieves because of the millions of deaths he has caused. But the *bhikkus* (Buddhist monks) comfort him by saying that really he has taken only one and a half human lives, because, of all those he killed, only one had embraced the Three Refuges, and one had adopted the Five Precepts.¹¹ The others killed do not matter so much because they did not worship the Buddha and were therefore no better than animals.

The fact that Buddhist doctrine forbids destroying *any* life, human or animal, adds irony to the story, as the compilers of these legends surely must have seen.¹² But it is more than just irony. Duttagamani's story embodies the dilemma faced by all kings who must shed blood to defend a religion that denounces bloodshed as foul and immoral.¹³

And it is not only kings who face a dilemma. The *bhikkus* face one even worse. Are they to follow the Buddhist precepts and advise the king accordingly, or are they to placate him? By cynically advising the king that in killing countless creatures he has committed no great sin, the *bhikkus* show the reader (or the chroniclers show us) how corrupt they have already become. The *Mahāvāmsa* seems to assume that unification of a large territory under a single flag entails warfare and bloodshed. In a unified state, ideally, there is no violent conflict. In fact, unity is almost synonymous with peace in this worldview, and both are conjoined with a notion of justice. But violent conflict is necessary to establish the unified state in the first place. Again the message seems to be that a king cannot be a Buddhist, that, in general, kingship and Buddhism cannot be reconciled. But today, as then, the idea of a unified Sri Lanka is sacred to Sinhalese Buddhists, and they cite the *Mahāvāmsa* in support of their claim that the island belongs to them alone.

The *Mahāvāmsa* also presupposes that an ambitious king needs someone to conquer. Thus Duttagamani goes on conquering rampages, even heedlessly killing some of his own men. He insists that his warfare is not selfish but intended to spread the doctrine of the Buddha.

After the great battle in which Elara is defeated and the island united, Duttagamani hands out honors to the warriors who have fought for him. One warrior refuses to accept any reward. When asked why, the warrior answers, "This is war." Duttagamani further asks the warrior, "When a

single realm is created, what war is there?” And the warrior answers, “I will do battle with those rebels, the passions, wherein victory is hard to win.” And the warrior thus renounces worldly life. This incident illustrates that the passions are viewed as rebels and mortal enemies. It also underlines the point already made about the incompatibility of kingship, when it entails war, and Buddhism.

Although Duttagamani has been absolved of any serious wrongdoing by the *bhikkus*, he is still not certain of his own salvation, because he remembers that, having vowed never to take a meal without the *bhikkus*, he once ate a pepper pod, leaving none for the *bhikkus*, and for this lapse he must make reparation. He builds a great monastery to house *bhikkus* and *bhikkunis* (female renunciators). This incident reveals that failure to share even a morsel with the *bhikkus* is a worse sin than slaying countless people and animals without cause. But certainly this episode, which need not have been recounted, is another comment by the chroniclers about the corruption of Buddhism.

The king gives numerous costly treasures to the *bhikkus*. The chapter ends with the comment, “Treasures which, in truth, bear on them the blot of the five faults become, if they be acquired by people who are gifted with special wisdom, possessed of the five advantages, therefore let the wise man strive to have them thus.” It becomes apparent that *bhikkus* in Buddhist Lanka played the same role as Brahmans in Hindu South India — they accepted gifts from a king who had obtained them by violent and polluting means, including warfare, and by their acceptance of the gifts purified the king of his sin.

The *Mahāvāmsa* is not about good versus evil. Nor is it about Sinhalese versus Tamils. It is an effort to reconcile the bloody history of kingship and conquest on the island with institutionalized Buddhism: to give divine sanction to the lineage of kings and the stories of their exploits and to portray the community of *bhikkus* as indispensable to legitimate governance by Sinhala kings. On a broader level, it is about warfare, dharma, human destinies, and human flaws, and in this respect it has some things in common with the *Mahābhārata*. It is a complex work. I have suggested that the chroniclers deliberately revealed the contradictions inherent in the alliance between *bhikkus* and kings. Alternatively, one may argue that the chroniclers lived in a world where ethical contradictions were not perceived. But I don’t believe the chroniclers were so ignorant.

The *Mahāvāmsa* was composed in Lanka before the period of intense religious antagonisms in the Tamil region in India, at a time when Bud-

dhism, Jainism, and the worship of what would now be called Hindu gods were not so much at odds with each other. Prince Vijaya in the *Mahāvāmsa* sought and received a princess for himself and wives for his ministers from a south Indian king. But even by the time the *Mahāvāmsa* was written, Theravada Buddhism in India was losing ground to Mahayana Buddhism. Although the *Mahāvāmsa* never mentions other forms of Buddhism, one of the motives for its composition may have been to shore up the position of Theravada monastic communities in relation to Lankan kingly states, as these monastic communities found themselves losing the patronage of Indian kings to other religions.

If the dating is correct, then the *Mahāvāmsa* would have been composed around the end of the Sangam period in southern India. It is possible that while the *Mahāvāmsa* was being put into writing in Lanka, the Tamil Jain and Buddhist stories of *Silappadikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* (dated between the third and seventh centuries A.D.) were being put into writing in southern India. I say “put into writing” because all three texts would have had oral precursors that went much further back in time. Whereas *Silappadikāram* is not about any specific, named religion (the Saiva goddess Minakshi is the most important but not the only deity in the story, one of the principal and most sympathetic characters is a Buddhist nun, and the book was written by a Jain ascetic), *Maṇimēkalai* is very specifically about Mahayana Buddhism. Both books are also about the power of women, most of all the power of girls in their teens. This theme remains salient in Tamil culture, but not among Sinhalese.

The story of *Silappadikāram* (The Ankle Bracelet) is still well known and exists in multiple oral and written variants in southern India and Lanka. The heroine of the story, Kannaki, marries at the age of twelve. Her husband is the young Kovalan. Sometime after their marriage, Kovalan takes up with the courtesan Madhavi, who is also twelve years old and trained in all the arts. Kovalan later returns to Kannaki, all his wealth spent. The couple travel to the city of Madurai to sell Kannaki’s golden ankle bracelet and make a new start. There, Kovalan is unjustly accused of theft and killed by order of the city’s king. Kannaki goes mad with rage, tears off her left breast, and hurls it into the dust. The city bursts into flame. She wanders through the countryside in a state of distraction for fourteen days, after which she is taken to heaven by the gods.

The Chera king Senguttuvan, learning Kannaki’s story, vows to honor her by traveling to the Himalayas, carving out a block of stone there, and bringing it back to his own country to turn it into a monument.¹⁴ En route he will conquer all the kings of the north. Senguttuvan’s chief minister tells

him, "No one can stop you if you choose to impose Tamil rule over the whole sea-encircled world." The minister further advises the king to carry with him a baked clay seal on which are stamped all the emblems of all the Tamil kings, so that all the great northern kings will know of his coming.

This story contains the first mention of the concept of Tamil political unity, as well as of world conquest by a Tamil king.¹⁵ The idea of world conquest seems to have been in the air at that time. In Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha had come to be seen as a king and world conqueror.¹⁶ Alexander the Great entered northern India in 327 B.C. with world conquest on his mind. But in northern India, his expedition faltered, and Alexander with his armies returned westward.

Where Alexander failed, it is unlikely that Senguttuvan could have succeeded, and have conquered all of north India. But that is not the issue. The point is the story and the precedent it may set. As he is about to go on his expedition northward, Senguttuvan is angered by rumors of kings who disparage him, and he wants to attack them. One of the king's counselors, the Brahman Madalan, seeks to rein in his ambition through diplomacy, by telling him that words disparaging him could only have been spoken by the Chola and Pandyan kings. No northern king would dare oppose him. "Therefore, appease your wrath."¹⁷ The implication here seems to be that even if the Chola and Pandyan kings speak disrespectfully of him, they are really on his side, because they are southern and Tamil, like him. Also, the kings of the north are considered weaker and easier to conquer than the kings of the south. Hence his minister advises him to "be firm in your resolve" and attack the northern kings but to leave the southern kings alone.

Both the Brahman Madalan and the king himself desire unity among the southern kings. But for Senguttuvan, this unity consists in nobody's criticizing him, whereas for Madalan the unity of the Tamil kings consists in their not fighting each other.

Senguttuvan returns victorious from his expedition to the north. But again some of the southern kings criticize him, this time for mistreating his captives. Again Senguttuvan grows angry with them, "his eyes casting flames." Again he contemplates war against his critical neighbors, and again Madalan talks him out of it.

"King of the sea-encircled world," says Madalan, "give up anger." He reminds Senguttuvan that he is aging and that during fifty years of rule he has made no sacrifices to please the gods and protect the land. He has only "contributed to the hecatombs of war." Madalan persuades Senguttuvan to give up his thoughts of war and instead prepare a great

sacrifice. Senguttuvan starts the preparations for the sacrifice and frees the enemy kings he has imprisoned. He thereby shows he has accepted the criticism of the southern kings and righted the wrong they justly accused him of. Here the poet cites a proverb: “The virtue of women is of no use where the king has failed first to establish the reign of justice.”

How is one to interpret this proverb in this context? That virtuous women alone cannot ensure the well-being of a country? That a woman’s virtue is of no use to her, when she lives beneath an unjust king? This second interpretation would certainly have applied to Kannaki. But the poet continues, apparently speaking in his own voice, to point out that the injustice done to Kannaki resulted in a series of tragedies far exceeding the suffering of this one woman, culminating in the conquering expedition of Senguttuvan and the killing of many people. The story of Senguttuvan is only incidentally connected to that of Kannaki. If there is a deeper connection, it may be that the anger of Kannaki is transferred somehow to the already combative Senguttuvan and empowers him to go on his not entirely justifiable conquering mission. We are left to ponder the value of anger.

The sequel to the *Silappadikāram* is the *Maṇimekhalai*. Manimekhalai is the daughter, by Kovalan, of the courtesan Madhavi. She is expected to follow in her mother’s footsteps, but she does not. Threatened with rape by a powerful prince, she must flee and hide. Like her mother, she is only twelve when the turning point of her life arrives.

Manimekhalai is destined to receive a magic bowl, always filled with an infinite supply of the best food, so that the possessor of the bowl can feed as many people or creatures as come her way. The bowl has been thrown into a lake by the king Aputra, who received it from the goddess of learning. Aputra discarded the bowl in despair when deprived of people and creatures to feed, and then starved himself to death in solitude. When Manimekhalai approaches the lake, the bowl flies into her hands. The goddess of the sea, Manimekhalai’s namesake and protector, then delivers a lecture on hunger:

Hunger is the most hateful of maladies. It degrades the most noble beings. It is the cause of all crime and kills all human feeling. . . . I cannot find words of sufficient praise to recount the merits of those generous beings who dedicate themselves to delivering man from the curse of starvation. . . . Food offered to those capable of providing it for themselves is really only a kind of exchange made under the pretext of charity. Only those who distribute food out of pure charity, expecting no return, are protectors of life in this world, which is but a temporary assembly of atoms.¹⁸

The suffering caused by hunger and the question of how to feed the hungry are two of the major themes of the book. In the midst of wealth and celebration, hunger is a constant presence and famine a constant threat. The god Indra, who controls the rain, may withhold it for years for no apparent reason, out of sheer malice. The only legitimate motivation to feed the hungry at that time would be pure compassion, as the author of the work makes clear. For Aputra, feeding the hungry becomes a kind of obsession. He cannot live without feeding others. And poor Manimekalai has all she can do just to keep from being raped, let alone perform acts of charity.

The related themes of rain and food, drought and famine, and the terrible power of hunger recur throughout Tamil literature. The *Tirukkural*, one of the earliest and most highly praised Tamil works, devotes one of its first sections to rain, because without rain there is no food, no life. In the *Puranānūru*, bards seeking the patronage of kings describe in realistic detail the ravages of hunger on women and children.¹⁹

While in the *Manimēkalai* the need to feed the hungry, whether humans or animals or birds, motivates the narrative, in the *Mahāvāmsa*, the imperative of feeding *bhikkus* is a constant refrain.²⁰ But the motivations are entirely different. An equally important theme in both the *Manimēkalai* and the *Silappadikāram* is the unsurpassable power of a virtuous young girl.²¹

A large section of the *Manimēkalai* is devoted to the exposition of Buddhist principles as they were learned by Manimekalai from her teachers. Alain Danielou, a modern translator of *Manimēkalai* into English, considers that Manimekalai was a historical figure and that her main preceptor, Aravana Adigal, was none other than the great Nagarjuna. The written narrative that bears Manimekalai's name contains stories within stories within stories and dwells on descriptive details of everyday life. Both the authors clearly enjoy writing narrative poetry. The exquisite beauty of life and the need to renounce enjoyment of this beauty for the very sake of all the beautiful living things on earth are themes common to the two books.

The *Mahāvāmsa* and *Silappadikāram-Manimēkalai* are not only seminal narratives in their respective cultures but also originate from approximately the same place and time. The place was the area within a radius of three hundred miles from Adam's Bridge, a series of islands connecting Sri Lanka with India. The time was a period of about three hundred years when Mahayana Buddhism was at its height in the Tamil country and Theravada Buddhism was coming into its own on the island of Lanka.

Despite the numerous differences between the Tamil and the Pali or Sinhala texts, their representations of kingship have some points in common. For instance, in both, valorous and virtuous enemies are praised: the composer of the text, Ilango, praises the brave “Aryan” warriors who fought against Senguttuvan, and the chroniclers of the *Mahāvāmsa* praise Elara, the chief enemy of Duttagamani.

As a character in a story, the Tamil Senguttuvan, like the Sinhala Duttagamani, is someone who can scarcely control his anger. Ilango states it straight out: “Senguttuvan was a quarrelsome person.” Senguttuvan’s innate anger is stressed in the *Silappadikāram*, just as Duttagamani’s anger is stressed in the *Mahāvāmsa*. His very name, altered from plain Gamani to Duttagamani because of his childhood behavior, means “angry Gamani.” Both kings put their anger to use by conquering other kings and sacking their cities, bringing riches back to their people, and reaping praise for themselves. For Duttagamani, “crossing the river” means defeating one Tamil king in Anuradhapura and then a large number of other kings, and thereby uniting the island of Lanka. For Senguttuvan it means crossing the Ganges far to the north, defeating all the kings in northern India, and thereby achieving dominion over the whole world. Both Senguttuvan and Duttagamani, having gone on brutal wars of conquest, are finally appeased, see that they must renounce their anger, and build great monuments to increase their merit.

Something, however, remains unsettled. Their deeds cannot be reconciled with the pacifist religions to which they subscribe. They are cruel men who suffer no punishment, whereas Elara and Aputra are good men who suffer cruel fates. In both the Sinhala and Tamil texts, the deep moral ambiguity, perhaps even absolute evil, of warfare is acknowledged, together with the arrogance and destructive anger of warrior kings. And yet these kings are praised, for they are perceived as necessary to the survival of their subjects.

Thus Sinhala and Tamil civilizations share the legend of a conquering, angry, and morally ambiguous, if not downright evil, king. The precedents set by these legends come into play in the current conflict.

On the female side, Kannaki of the *Silappadikāram* is considered by many modern Tamils to be an exemplar of perfect Tamil womanhood. She stands at the center of what some Tamils refer to as *tamiṟ paṅbāḍu*, Tamil culture. Neither Manimekalai nor her mother, the courtesan Madhavi, can serve as a perfect role model, for a traditional Tamil woman is expected above all else to be the chaste servant of her husband.²² Manimekalai refuses to marry, and her mother, Madhavi, being a cour-

tesan, is not chaste. However, Madhavi has honor and intelligence. She is skilled to perfection in all the fine arts. She is blessed with bewitching beauty, but she is no witch; she is thoroughly human.

Most important, Madhavi, like Kannaki, is very young, just twelve years old, when she enters the world of men. At that moment, she represents human perfection. We can know by a bit of extrapolation from the timing of her affair with Kovalan that she bore her daughter, Manimekalai, when she was no older than fourteen. Manimekalai is likewise perfect when she steps into the world, a pure, beautiful, highly educated twelve-year-old girl. This girl makes a hard decision to act against the tradition into which she was born, and her adherence to this decision leads her to enlightenment.

Although the authors of the *Mahāvāmsa* and *Silappadikāram-Manimekalai* apparently did not know each other's works, the story of Kannaki was brought from southern India to Sri Lanka, where she became the Buddhist goddess Pattini. Gananath Obeyesekere states that Kannaki is no longer the basis of a cult in India but has been absorbed into other goddess cults there.²³ But although Kannaki is not the center of a cult in the modern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, it would be hard to find a literate adult Tamil person (and perhaps even an unlettered one) who does not know her story. Among Sinhalese people in southern Sri Lanka, Pattini is the center of a well-developed cult, with elaborate rituals incorporating stories and symbolism that are not present in the *Silappadikāram*. In addition, the Tamils of Batticaloa on the east coast of Sri Lanka continue to worship Kannaki and have temples and rituals dedicated to her. Thus the values and emotions this goddess represents are apparently shared to some degree by Sinhala and Tamil people. The terrible power of anger is certainly something that both sides respect, fear, and mobilize against real and perceived injustices.

The *Mahāvāmsa* and the texts of the Sangam period are invoked by Sinhala and Tamil nationalists to support their competing, mutually incompatible causes. But the use of these texts as propaganda tools obscures their subtexts, their ambiguities, and their thinly veiled criticisms of the existing social order. That warring kings are evil and that warfare is unconscionable may have been among the messages the writers most strongly wished to convey. One thing is clear: dynasties, religions, and birth categories of people can be made to inhere in each other only tenuously, through the sheerest and most illogical of fictions.

The early Lankan chronicles are said to have shown virulent antagonism to Tamils. However, in the *Mahāvāmsa*, this antagonism seems to

be ascribed to certain characters in the texts rather than harbored by the texts' compilers and authors. No motivation for hatred of Tamils is ever offered. According to the *Mahāvāmsa*, the hero of these chronicles, Duttagamani, united under one banner a previously disunited island. This unification was seen as a good thing, but bringing it about entailed terrible evil. Tamils as a race are not described in the first Lankan chronicles one way or the other. It is not even entirely clear what the term *Damila* means in these texts: Someone who speaks the Tamil language? Who belongs to a certain society? Who has a certain lineage? Who behaves in a certain way? For that matter, it is not clear what *Sinhala* means when it refers to people.²⁴ Conflicts were between kings, and not between different categories of human being.

In the medieval Tamil Saiva texts, Buddhists (*bauttarkal*) were not equated with Sinhala people. Buddhists were seen by Saivas as exponents of a rival religion, and not inhabitants of a specific geographic region. Conflicts in the Tamil country, too, were between kings, who adopted one or another religious persuasion. There were also conflicts between religious communities, each carrying the banner of a different god. In fact, gods *were* kings, and kings were gods. Nevertheless, conflicts between flesh-and-blood kings, as far as can be told, primarily involved territory, whereas the conflicts between proponents of different gods involved ideas, and the winning of human followers. The god Siva was represented as a powerful conquering king; he was also represented as the very essence of love. Vaishnavas and Saivas were mutual antagonists. There were sometimes violent conflicts between proponents of different religions, all of which preached abstention from violence. All of this had little if anything to do with any naturalized categories of people. An individual's religion was a matter of personal choice. The different religions, like different political parties, tried to win people from each other. Bards and poets composed praise songs for kings as well as for gods. They could also withhold praise, or not so covertly criticize a king or chieftain for his cruelty or selfishness.²⁵ A good praise song for a king could win the king's patronage, and it could also serve as good publicity for the king. A good argument in favor of religion A could win followers over from religion B. That the songs and the debates had political value did not mean that they had no aesthetic, spiritual, or emotional value. They had all of these. That is why they were powerful.

Although kings fought kings and gods fought gods, and although kings were gods and gods (including the Buddha as represented in Theravada) were kings, the conflicts between gods or religions did not

necessarily align with the conflicts between kings or polities. Some kings patronized only their favorite religions; others patronized all religions. In this respect, the kings of yore were not unlike modern Sri Lankan and South Indian people, who are often religiously eclectic.

The development of *pattu*-based worship in South India ultimately was not dependent on religious or political rivalries. It was and remains popular because it is available to all and because it aims for the heart. It is accessible to anyone who knows the language in which its literature was composed, and the languages of *pattu* and *bhakti* poets were the local vernaculars.

This mode of worship did not, however, catch on among people who identified themselves as Sinhalese. This may be because the very concept of Sinhalese arose as an integral part of Lankan-Buddhist historical mythology. The *Mahāvāmsa* is the only origin story and the only foundational history the Sinhala people have. There are no alternative versions. Their very identity as Sinhalese ties them to Theravada Buddhism. To have embraced South Indian-style devotionalism, even toward the Buddha, would have been a betrayal of their heritage, and most of all a betrayal of the *bhikkus*, who, like Hindu priests, mediated between common people and the divine. *Bhakti* made such mediators unnecessary: it posited a direct connection between a worshipper and the god. *Bhikkus* could not have endured a style of worship that rendered them unnecessary; they depended for their survival on laypeople's belief in their holiness.

But just as references to Buddhism were not essential to the development of Saiva devotionalism, except perhaps as a kind of foil, references to Tamils in the earliest Lankan chronicles were arguably not essential to the aim of those texts, which was to document the history of kingship in relation to Buddhism on the island, somehow finding a way to weave the two together. In both the *Mahāvāmsa* and the *Silappadikāram*, the most lauded kings are those who are driven by something deep inside them to conquer, and thus necessarily to kill. The most lauded king seeks the worthiest opponent, takes over all that is his, and thereby enriches the people at the center of the conqueror's dominion.

For all their shared values, the value of passion was and remains quite different between Tamil and Sinhalese people. In Sinhalese Buddhism, passion is a destructive and selfish force. Passion is beyond control: it is part of the dangerous wild. It is attributed to the *yakku*, the creatures of the wild, who are constantly threatening the order and equanimity of people's lives and must be kept under control.²⁶ Demons, gods beneath the

Buddha, and kings, the wielders of earthly power, are allowed to experience passion. In fact, they own it. Aspirants to spiritual peace and freedom, however, renounce it. *Bhikkus* are, in the ideal, passionless people.

In contrast, a strong current in Tamil and other South Indian literature portrays passion as a beautiful but dangerous gift. It is there to be channeled and mobilized for the sake of the highest good. Without passion, nothing can be done. Nature (which includes the dangerous wild) is beautiful, to be embraced and enjoyed.

If one considers the *Mahāvāmsa*, the *Silappadikāram*, and *Maṇimēkalai* as threads in the knot, or as streams drawn into the storm of the current armed conflict in Sri Lanka, it is essential to view these books not as accounts of “what really happened” so long ago, but rather to think of them as stories, or collections of stories, that have endured over time or have been “rediscovered,” in part because they have been written down. But then again, were they not written down, and kept over all these years, because they are great stories? Stories can have tremendous power in moving people to think in certain ways and act in certain ways.

One scholar has aptly suggested that the *Mahāvāmsa* is not so much about the victory of “Sinhala protonationalism” over “Dravidian imperialism” as it is about “the first real success of centripetalism over centrifugalism in Sri Lanka’s history.”²⁷ Setting aside the question of whether the *Mahāvāmsa* is history or something else, the observation about centralization versus decentralization, pulling in versus letting go, pertains to the metaphorical knot that I posited at the beginning of this chapter.²⁸ Still, it is not entirely clear that these two forces are at work in the ancient chronicle. The idea of the conquering hero, whose cruelty and destructive power are employed in service to the Buddha, strikes me as a more central theme of the text. A second major theme, repeatedly stressed, is the importance of maintaining the entire island under Sinhala Buddhist rule.

The models of kingship developed in the old Sinhala and Tamil texts were preserved in the texts throughout the years of colonization; but the practice of kingship, with all its unwritten rules, its compromises, its checks and balances, was washed away. In the mid-twentieth century, at the time of independence, these models were revived and deployed, but the new versions were missing the balances and compromises that may have existed before. Some of the modern, democratically elected leaders of Lanka have been nothing but powermongers for whom neither dharma nor any modern notion of fairness and justice was ever a concern. (Of course, this is true of many modern, democratically elected leaders in other nations, too.)

Medieval History

After the early chronicles, Sinhala-Buddhist-Lankan and Tamil-Saiva histories continue, not surprisingly, to focus on kings and conquests. In both Lanka and India, dynasties were established, and small and large kingdoms grew like mushrooms after rain. The more powerful and aggressive rulers expanded their dominions. Strategic alliances were formed, and great empires were built. Raiding parties and regular armies from the mainland of India sometimes invaded the territories of kings on the island of Lanka, and vice versa. Sinhala armies helped Tamil kings defeat other Tamil kings in battle, and Tamil armies helped Sinhala kings defeat other Sinhala kings.²⁹

Lankan civilization is traditionally considered to have been at its peak in the two cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Anuradhapura was established in the fourth century B.C. and is said to have remained a seat of power for more than two thousand years. A cutting from the Bodhi tree, under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment, is said in the Lankan chronicles to have been planted in that city. To modern Sinhalese, Anuradhapura symbolizes the pride of their heritage. But although — or because — the city was always a center of power, it was frequently fought over, within ruling families and between different kings. Sometimes Tamil kings occupied the throne, sometimes Sinhala kings. At the end of the tenth century A.D., Rajaraja Chola, the king of the most powerful and largest Tamil empire ever, captured and sacked Anuradhapura. Rajaraja's son, Rajendra, expanded the Chola empire still further. The Cholas moved the capital of Lanka from Anuradhapura to the nearby city of Polonnaruwa, which was more defensible militarily. The Cholas ruled the whole island of Lanka for seventy-five years as a province of their far-flung empire.

The Cholas were Saivas and supported the Saiva religion. Under Chola rule, Tamil arts and civilization flourished, and great Saiva temples were built. Present-day Tamils still look back to the Chola empire as a time of glory. Long, romantic historical novels are written about it. But for Lankan Buddhists, the Chola "occupation" of Lanka was not a good time. In 1070, a Sinhala king drove the Cholas out of Lanka, and Sinhala rule was reestablished.

The Anuradhapura-Polonnaruwa age in Sri Lanka is most celebrated for the irrigation systems built and sustained during that period. A large irrigation project requires extensive organization, expertise, and cooperation. One reason why unification of diverse peoples and lands is often held to be a good thing is that political unification facilitates consolida-

tion of resources, allowing the building of resource-intensive projects for the common good.³⁰ In addition, historians sometimes suggest that internal unity is necessary to withstand external pressures. When a great kingdom or empire is invaded and conquered by armies from the outside, the defeat is a sign that the kingdom or empire was already vulnerable because of internal decline and dissension. Without such internal vulnerabilities, it might have withstood the external challenges.

The flip side of this argument has been made by the anthropologist Mary Douglas: when a society faces serious external challenges, it reinforces not only its city walls but also its conceptual walls, and any internal heterodoxy is viewed as foreign and therefore dangerous. Mass paranoia can then result, and harmless people can be destroyed. Obviously, such a response does not help the society under challenge but only renders it more vulnerable.

From yet another point of view, if a society is unified by force, as for instance by military conquest or slavery, it can be hard to hold together except by continuous applications of more force, which sap the society's resources. This is exactly the situation in Sri Lanka today. Present-day Sinhala nationalists argue that unity is necessary because the unity of the island is sacred. But the current fear of Tamils as "outsiders" is a classic reaction of the sort identified by Douglas. Tamils are blamed for all the internal problems faced by Sinhalese. Extremists believe that if only Tamils were eliminated, the society would be whole and perfect "again." But war against the Tamils exacerbates problems and quarrels within Sinhalese society. The idealized unity of the past is not the same as the sought-after unity of the present.

After the Chola rulers were driven out of Lanka, Sinhala civilization rallied. Over the next hundred years in Lanka, Buddhism was revived, renewed, and restored. Great new water tanks and irrigation canals were built, and Polonnaruwa became a center of artistic and architectural achievement. The period from 1070 to about 1200 was marked by several good kings who nurtured the society and intermittent periods of political instability. At the end of the twelfth century, it became mandatory for the Sinhala king to be a Buddhist.³¹

The deathblow to the Anuradhapura-Polonnaruwa age in Lanka was dealt not by any Tamil but by Magha of Kalinga. Kalinga was a long-established dynastic civilization in the area of east India now called Orissa and the home of the great-grandmother of Prince Vijaya of the *Mahāvāmsa*. Thus we may assume travel and communications between Kalinga and the Sinhala country from at least the beginning of Sinhala

written history. Much later in history, Kalinga kings harassed the Tamil Chola kings and invaded their territory south of Kalinga. Thus Kalingas were enemies both of the Chola Tamils and of the Sinhalese. Historians concur that Magha's rule in Polonnaruwa, from 1215 to 1236, was devastating. Some Sinhalese blame the Cholas for the defeat and destruction of Polonnaruwa, but actually it was their mutual enemy the Kalingas who accomplished this task.

After Magha died, Polonnaruwa was gradually abandoned. The irrigation canals of the central dry zone could not be maintained, malaria-bearing mosquitoes bred in the deserted tanks and waterways, and the Sinhalese residents migrated to the lush southwest of the island. A Tamil kingdom had been established in the north of the island, deriving wealth from the pearl fisheries around the Jaffna peninsula. The formerly irrigated dry zone in the north-central area turned to jungle and formed a buffer between the Tamils and the Sinhalese.³² By the mid-fifteenth century, the Sinhalese kingdom of Kotte had grown up in the south, deriving wealth from the cinnamon trade. The independent kingdom of Kandy developed in the central mountainous region. When Europeans arrived, they found these three separate kingdoms.

Recent History

EUROPEAN INROADS

The Portuguese arrived in 1505. They were more interested in establishing coastal trade than in exploring the interior. They were also interested in propagating Catholicism, and they engaged in both activities aggressively and violently. Although they were few in number, they had superior firepower. After the Portuguese took over Kotte on the southwest coast and Jaffna in the north, the central mountain kingdom of Kandy became a refuge for Buddhist monks and others who could not or would not live under Portuguese domination.

Portuguese conversions to Catholicism angered both Sinhalese and Tamils, even though converts were numerous among both groups. These conversions were linked with military aggression and transparent ambitions for appropriating the wealth of the island. The initial target of the Portuguese had been Muslim traders, who, in addition to holding a near-monopoly over commerce in the Indian Ocean after the decline of the Chola maritime trade, practiced a religion hated by Catholics. After the

Portuguese established control over the coastal trading areas, they turned their religious attentions to both Buddhism and Saivism, whose adherents they persecuted with zeal.

A third interest of the Portuguese was education, as giving children a Catholic education was a good way of gaining converts. They took away the Sinhala heir to the throne when he was a child on the pretext of protecting him from his father's enemies, had him educated by Catholic priests, and thus converted him to Catholicism, alienating him from his people and rendering him dependent on his Portuguese advisers.

After 150 years of Portuguese domination, the Dutch drove them out and took over the maritime provinces. The Dutch, although they were kinder and more tolerant than the Portuguese, were fiercely Protestant, and they persecuted Catholics. Thus the people of the island were subjected to a double dose of religious warfare, European style. If the combination of military conquest, religious persecution, and aggressive conversions had not previously been recognized on the island as a strategy of political domination, it now would have become readily apparent. After another 150 years, around 1800, the British took over from the Dutch, who put up little resistance.

BRITISH RULE

One determining cause of the current conflict in Sri Lanka is the legacy of British colonial policy. The policy of the British in South Asia included the principle of knowing their subjects.³³ To this end, the colonizers classified the colonized according to caste, physical type, religion, language, region, kinship patterns, means of subsistence, level of savagery, degree of manliness, and so forth. The classification was held to be a precise and accurate record of natural fact. It aimed to be scientific: to quantify, measure, standardize, and categorize. It was pragmatic, ascertaining which categories of people would be useful and in what ways. Existing customs, habits, and organizations were allowed to continue if they were not considered harmful to the inhabitants or to the British government; all others were suppressed or abolished. Other precepts of colonial rule included the following: Keep the traditions you approve of as they have been — that is, as you believe they have been, or as your trusted native informants tell you they have been — from time immemorial. Disambiguate ambiguities. Maintain clear distinctions. Give names to categories that have no name, or many names. Recruit servants from among the most educable of the population, those who most resemble you, or

can be most easily made to resemble you, but will not seek to be your rivals. Let missionaries and others collect knowledge about your subjects for you. Let missionaries and others found schools to educate the people in your language, your values, and your means of social organization.

The British colonial governments created systems of knowledge intended to contain, in both the cognitive and the political senses, the diverse peoples they governed. In creating these systems of knowledge, they transformed existing realities and created new ones, sometimes knowingly but at other times quite unwittingly. Systems of government were knowingly transformed, whereas the transformation of such categories as caste, religion, kinship, and language was on the whole unwitting.

Even where they did not significantly change the realities, British and other European influences radically changed the metarealities. The concept of nation, with its related concept of a bounded nation-state, was perhaps the most profoundly unsettling metareality introduced to South Asia from the West. Whereas previously a kingdom had been defined by its center, and the outermost limits of a kingdom or empire were not always precise, now strict geographical boundaries were drawn between polities. In order to govern in their own fashion, the British colonists had to make maps and draw lines so that every bit of land and every human settlement was accounted for. This emphasis on boundaries remains a factor exacerbating the conflict between ethnic groups on the island.

India was too vast for Britain to comprehend, manage, contain, govern, or mold to its own image, even with its brilliant apparatus of knowledge and control. But Britain had in common with Sri Lanka that it was an island, within a day's sailing distance of a great continent, and had a long history of warfare and conquest, wealth and trade, fierce foreign armies storming the shores, legends of glorious kingdoms and kings, a blooded aristocracy, and (unlike precolonial India) a definite sense of its own distinctiveness. Perhaps Britain saw a certain tropical likeness of itself in Sri Lanka, and a flattering likeness at that, for Sri Lanka has a beauty and grace, an abundance of natural life, a mystery and a warmth that Britain might covet. Perhaps this is why Britain treated Sri Lanka so (relatively) kindly.

By the same token, Sri Lanka gave the British a relatively easy time. The maritime provinces had been colonized for three hundred years already and were thus in a sense prepared for the British arrival. Only the highland kingdom of Kandy could not be easily annexed. The Dutch had tried and failed to gain control over it, and the initial British efforts likewise met with failure. The mountain terrain was rough, and the trails were

set with traps. Advancing troops were either killed by Kandyan warriors on the way in or else succumbed to disease on the way out.

The Kandyan kingdom was unique also in that it was a Tamil-Sinhalese hybrid. It was not unknown for Sinhala kings to take wives from ruling families of South India.³⁴ Vijaya was the first to do so: because there were no women of high enough rank on the island for him to marry, he procured a properly royal consort from the Tamil city of Madurai. Later kings occasionally followed suit. When the kingdom of Kandy remained the only true kingdom on the island, the lowland kingdoms having fallen under the dominion of European and British colonists, the kings of Kandy also sought and procured their queens from Madurai. In addition to the need for a fresh infusion of royal blood, the Kandyan kings had another reason to take their wives from abroad: they ruled over a collection of stroppey chieftoms, and there was some danger that a coalition of chieftains could overthrow the king in favor of a leader more to their liking. To keep themselves separate from and higher than the Kandyan chiefly nobility, the kings took wives from outside that nobility. If the chiefs rose against the king, he could call for assistance from his powerful South Indian in-laws. Because the Kandyan kings had received military assistance from the Tamil ruling family of Nayaks in Madurai to help fight off the Portuguese, alliances between Kandy and Madurai were already established. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marital alliances between Kandyan kings and Nayak princesses became a matter of policy.

However, as the Nayak kingdom in the Tamil country lost ground to more powerful forces seeking control of South India, when a Nayak princess married a Kandyan king, she brought all her relatives with her. The Kandyan kingdom came to have a strong South Indian flavor. Whereas the Kandyan Sinhalese were patrilineal, the Nayak family had a strong matrilineal tradition. Thus, when one Sinhalese Kandyan king died without offspring by his queen, a brother of his Tamil queen assumed the throne even though the king had had offspring by a secondary, Kandyan wife. These children were not even considered heirs to the throne. The Sinhalese Kandyan aristocracy had no problem with this new form of succession. Either they wanted only pure royal blood on the throne, or else patriliney and Sinhalese blood were not of great importance to them in choosing a king. Thus, in 1739, the Tamil Nayak dynasty came to rule the kingdom of Kandy. Subsequent Nayak kings of Kandy followed tradition and took their wives from among their kin in India. At least one Nayak king married four Madurai princesses, each of whom brought her relatives with her.

It was not until 1815 that the Sinhalese nobles rebelled, apparently in

response to the unwise and cruel rule of the current Nayak boy king. The British stepped in at this point, made a deal with the chiefs, and gained control of Kandy. The deposed king and all his male relatives were sent back to India.

The agreement with the Sinhala chieftains stipulated that “the Dominion of the Kandyan Provinces is vested in the Sovereign of the British Empire under King George III and to being exercised through the Governors of Ceylon for the time being”; that “the native headmen” (the Sinhala chieftains) would continue to enjoy “the rights and privileges and powers of the respective offices”; and that there would be accorded “to all other classes of people, the safety of their persons and property with their civil rights and immunities according to the laws Institutions and Customs established and in force among them.”

The meaning of the term *dominion*, along with that of *for the time being*, may not have been entirely clear. It would have been clear that the Sinhala Kandyan people were being guaranteed the right to maintain their customary social order and protection against violent attacks from outsiders — essentially what they expected of a good king. Another part of the agreement with the Sinhala chieftains was that “the Religion of the Boodoo professed by the Chiefs and inhabitants of these Provinces is declared inviolable, its Rites, Ministers and Places of Worship are to be maintained and protected.”³⁵ The treaty was not honored as the Kandyans expected, and, a mere three years later, the Kandyan Sinhala chieftains rebelled against British rule. But it was already too late to unseat the British, whose annexation of Kandy had given them control over the whole island and the strength to put down any local rebellion.

One lesson to be gleaned from this story is that Tamils and Sinhalese in the Kandyan kingdom during the eighteenth century had no problem intermarrying or even being ruled by one another. One may reasonably surmise that until the nineteenth century, the two groups got along together fine as long as they did not step on one another’s toes, which in general they had no reason to do. They shared certain understandings of good governance and the nature of kingship. These shared understandings were, however, challenged and disrupted by their new rulers.

By one skillful act, in Kandy, of playing one side against the other — a strategy they employed regularly in South Asia — the British consolidated their rule over the island of Lanka. And this event leads to another general lesson. The British created animosities of whole birth categories of people against whole other birth categories of people where there were no such animosities before. They essentialized what they considered to be races and then, deliberately or not, set those races against each other. The

British, along with other Western Europeans and Americans, at that time genuinely believed in the essential qualities of races and of birth categories. Although there might have been disagreement over what constituted the essential qualities of a particular race, such as Brahmans or Red Indians, there was little or no disagreement over the reality of distinct races, each with its essential, heritable qualities. This concept of essential qualities of one or another race haunts Sri Lanka still, and is what makes the war between Tamils and Sinhalese conceivable.

British rule and administration completely transformed the island's cultures and civilizations. Old categories were eliminated and new ones created. High-country Sinhalese, from the Kandyan area, were distinguished from low-country Sinhalese, from the rich southern agricultural area. Sri Lankan Tamils, who had lived for many generations on the island, were distinguished from Indian Tamils, who had been imported by the British to work in the tea and coffee plantations. New export crops — coffee, tea, and rubber — were developed. Education and literacy — until then the preserve of a few — became a route to economic and political advancement to which all were in principle entitled. Kings and kingship were eliminated (except for the British monarchy), and democratic egalitarianism, economic liberalism, a modern constitution, and the rule of law were introduced in their stead. Sri Lankans were recruited into the civil service, and a Westernized elite was created.

With the disappearance of monarchy, the *bhikkus* saw their position imperiled: for hundreds of years, they had obtained support from the king in exchange for the divine legitimacy they bestowed on him. They now had to struggle for protection and privilege. The monks, all sons of Sinhala families, encountered new enemies: in addition to the British colonial rulers, who fostered Christian missionary activities, they felt themselves to be in conflict with Sri Lankan Tamils, who were predominantly Saiva, with a large contingent of Christians and few if any Buddhists. The Sinhala people by and large had no reason to oppose the Buddhist monastic tradition of the island and many reasons to support it.

After Sri Lanka attained independence, all the island's prior history was reinterpreted as much as possible in terms of a conflict between Sinhala and Tamil.

GLOBAL CAPITAL AND ITS LOCAL EFFECTS

The transformations caused by colonial, and in particular British, rule of the island contributed to the current conflict by creating sources of dis-

cord among Tamils and Sinhalese, even though there is no reason to think that the British colonial administrators (at least after they had established stable rule over the island) intended or desired such tensions. Internal conflict, after all, does not make for an easily governed country.

By the time of independence in 1948, the people of Sri Lanka were very well off in comparison to people of other Third World countries. Sri Lanka became a model for the provision of “basic human needs.”³⁶ Infant mortality was low, life expectancy was high, food was abundant, and the educational system was good and available to most children. The literacy rate was and remains very high. India, by contrast, was and remains home to massive poverty and illiteracy.

The independent Sri Lankan government started out with a liberal, modernist, multiethnic and nationalist bent under the United National Party (UNP). In 1952, a World Bank study noted that 35 percent of the budget of Sri Lanka was spent on social and welfare services — a proportion that the bank considered too high.³⁷ The prime minister’s bending to the bank’s will caused increases in food prices and reductions in food subsidies and other social benefits. Nationwide protests at such changes led to the defeat of the UNP government in the 1956 elections.

The subsequent Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government, led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, expanded pension plans, medical care, nutrition programs, and food and fuel subsidies. Foreign investment was restricted, critical industries were nationalized, and land-reform measures nationalized plantations and redistributed land to the peasants.³⁸ Despite the disapproval of foreign aid agencies, for twenty-nine years after independence, through several administrations, Sri Lanka grew as a welfare state.

Effectively, the parties competing for power on the national stage had little choice but to continue to increase social benefits for the majority, as any given politician’s continuance in office depended on his or her ability to woo the majority of voters, and the majority wanted all the benefits from the government they could get. No government, however, could meet all the demands of the voters without amassing a mountain of debt and incurring the displeasure of international investors and aid agencies, which in turn meant reductions in aid and thus in social benefits. Some degree of economic turmoil was inevitable. The people were already highly politicized and prepared to take to the streets to protest any perceived injustice.

Very early in the postindependence period, economic troubles were transformed into ethnic antagonisms. Nascent discontent with the trans-ethnic ruling class, which had taken over government from the British,

was deflected onto the ethnic minorities. Tamils, the largest ethnic minority, came to be defined as malicious and their interests inimical to those of Sinhalese. The ruling class, which controlled both major parties and thereby the government, was let off the hook.

Because the vast majority of people in the country were Sinhalese, the Sinhalese were competitively courted in every election. And in courting the Sinhalese people as though they were all ethnonationalists, the post-independence politicians gave a sharp edge to that nationalism and may have instilled it in many who would otherwise have remained indifferent to it.³⁹

Control of the government shifted back and forth between two major political parties, the conservative and Western-oriented UNP and the more leftist-nationalist SLFP. Both parties used Buddhist imagery and terminology to appeal to Sinhalese voters. Sri Lankan national pride was identified with Sinhala pride. Tamils were labelled as exogenous invaders. Sinhala people were encouraged by both major parties to direct their hostilities against Tamils, who in turn resisted their marginalization. Sinhalese interpreted even peaceful resistance as threatening to their perceived control of the island, and thus to their economic well-being. Initially, Tamil resistance took the form of *satyagrāhas* — Gandhian-style, nonviolent demonstrations. As marginalization turned into violent oppression, however, Tamil resistance, too, gradually became violent.

Until the 1970s, the main Sinhalese grudge against Tamils was that they were economically and politically privileged. This claim was based on the fact that Tamils were disproportionately represented in government, the professions, and the universities. Overlooked were the facts that Tamils were still a minority in government and had no leverage there, and that the majority of Tamil people were no better off educationally or economically than the majority of Sinhala people.

In the early 1970s, the Sinhala Marxist militant Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front, or JVP) arose in the south of the island, and militant Tamil youth movements began to emerge in the Jaffna peninsula in the north. In 1971, when the JVP attempted a coup against the government, it was met with massive and merciless military destruction. In 1975, the LTTE assassinated the mayor of Jaffna, who supported the SLFP.

Even as late as the mid-1970s, few people would have advocated all-out civil war. If the government had managed to keep the country economically stable; if there had been strong, enduring transpartisan will to quell racist sentiment; and if murderous ethnic riots had been stopped in their

tracks and met with genuine justice, perhaps the simmering strife might have subsided. But this is mere speculation.

In 1978, elections brought a change of government from the left-wing SLFP to the more conservative UNP, resulting in a change of development policy from welfare socialism to a liberalized, open economy. Welfare socialism and free-market liberalism are two radically different ways of managing the wealth of a country, accompanied by two radically different ways of governing a people. The former, in principle, takes it as its top priority to ensure the welfare of all those who live in the country, regardless of individual productivity. The poor in particular are looked after. Internal economic self-sufficiency is promoted, foreign investment is discouraged, and private industry is nationalized — in principle, to ensure that the wealth of the country belongs to the public domain and is not taken up by private or overseas interests. Two disadvantages of such a system are a lack of incentives for increasing productivity and problems with ensuring government accountability. Money meant for public welfare may be channeled through bureaucratic agencies to the bureaucrats' friends and families.

The main priority of free-market liberalism is to expand a nation's economy by fostering greater productivity through unregulated competition. In practice this means that the overall monetary wealth of a country may grow, but there are definite winners and definite losers, with little protection for individuals and families against poverty or even starvation. Under a neoliberal economy, success in obtaining wealth is rewarded with opportunities to compound that wealth, and just as in a welfare economy, corrupt and illegal activities on the part of the powerful may rob people lower on the economic hierarchy of their savings and livelihoods, among other things.

International development agencies applauded the 1978 shift in Sri Lanka's economic priorities. Large infusions of foreign capital became available for massive public works projects, which were expected to improve the country's infrastructure and thereby support industrial development. The most important such work was the Mahaveli River Development Scheme, which aimed to bring new land under irrigation while also providing hydroelectric power. Jobs were created by this project. In addition, the Mahaveli project was a matter of cultural pride, because it evoked images of the ancient irrigation-based civilization of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the golden age of Sinhala history.

When jobs on this project were handed out, the existing system of patronage politics was strengthened. The ruling class benefited. The

influx of foreign capital enabled individuals in key political positions to enrich themselves. As Ronald Herring points out, “Fortunes were made.” Not only did some individuals increase their wealth, as might reasonably be expected, but they amassed fortunes out of foreign aid. Since all foreign aid money was channeled through the state, the state’s power expanded. Deficit spending increased, and foreign investors urged less social and welfare expenditure. But spending on public salaries and wages — which Herring identifies as “one important measure of patronage” — increased. USAID-funded housing programs also served the interests of political patronage. Houses, like jobs, were traded for votes. When newly irrigated land was up for distribution, the same rule applied. Inevitably, according to Herring, “the lion’s share of boons appeared in Sinhala areas.”⁴⁰ In addition, Sinhala people from the south were resettled in the Mahaveli area. Repeated references were made to Sinhala national pride: “Inspired by engineering feats of an ancient kingdom and hailed as the world’s largest foreign aid project, the Mahaveli scheme was to be a symbol of progress and national identity.”⁴¹

Tamils were left out of this scheme and its accompanying vision, not only symbolically but also economically. The nationalism celebrated by the Mahaveli project was specifically Sinhala nationalism, and the beneficiaries were Sinhalese also. Tamil resentment was compounded because Tamils considered that the newly irrigated and resettled land was traditionally Tamil land. They felt that they were being colonized by the Sinhalese and that their numbers in their own territory were being diluted. In fact, resettlement of Sinhalese in Tamil-majority areas had begun immediately after independence, but the Mahaveli project accelerated this process. Tamil people’s chances of acquiring local political strength — control over a large, contiguous, legally defined section of the country in which Tamils would form a solid majority — were reduced. Sinhalese settlers in that area were viewed by Tamils somewhat as Jewish settlers on the West Bank are viewed by Palestinians. Additionally, some of the Sinhalese settlers were people who were not wanted in the south: people who did not know how to farm, some of whom were criminals. Subsequent ethnic violence in these areas was fierce, brutal, and personal.

The flames of ethnic antagonism had already been fanned by the SLFP government under Sirimavo Bandaranaike (prime minister from 1960 to 1965 and from 1970 to 1977), who combined welfare socialism with a vehement and emotional pro-Sinhala ethnonationalist stance — despite the fact that her husband, when he was prime minister, had been assassinated by a Sinhala ethnonationalist. Tamils were branded as capi-

talists, although, “objectively, economic position did not track ethnicity closely. . . . [There was no] neat ethnic division of labor.”⁴² Because educated Jaffna Tamils had benefited under British colonial rule and were favored as administrators, Tamils were also branded as “loyalists” to the British, and therefore as traitors to the Sri Lankan nation. Some say that the favoring of Jaffna Tamils by colonial governors was part of England’s “divide and rule” policy. Others say that Jaffna Tamils were favored because they already had a tradition of educated professionalism, which tradition in turn was a consequence of the fact that Jaffna’s soil was not hospitable to agriculture, so the Jaffna Tamils had turned to trade and the professions as alternative means of accruing wealth. Meanwhile, Tamil people who hailed not from Jaffna but from the east or the hill country lived primarily by farming, fishing, and wage labor, just as most Sinhalese people did.

In the mid-1970s, Tamil leaders united to form a single political party to contest the coming 1977 elections. The platform of this party, called the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), was the Vaddukkoddai Resolution of 1976, mandating an independent, separate state for Tamils. During the 1977 elections, the TULF won an overwhelming majority of Tamil votes from the north and east. During the same period, Tamil youth stepped up their agitation for a separate state. “An apparently false rumor that Sinhalese policemen had died at the hands of Tamil terrorists, combined with other rumors of alleged anti-Sinhalese statements made by Tamil politicians, sparked brutal communal rioting that engulfed the island within two weeks of the new government’s inauguration. The rioting marked the first major outbreak of communal violence in the nineteen years since the riots of 1958. Casualties were many, especially among Tamils, both the Sri Lankan Tamils of Jaffna and the Indian Tamil plantation workers. The Tamil Refugee Rehabilitation Organization estimated the death toll at 300.”⁴³ Tamils were not the only people who suffered from the political and economic transformations of the postindependence period, nor were they the first to turn to active militancy.

A radical Sinhala left wing, originally Marxist but later allying with the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist right wing, has also been a force to contend with. In 1971, the Sinhala far Left, or JVP, driven by youths who had been educated for white-collar employment but then denied jobs or higher education, staged a violent insurrection whose aim was to overthrow the government. The insurrection was brutally suppressed by the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). Later JVP insurgencies in 1981 and 1987–89 were likewise met with harsh military action. Tens of thousands of people were killed,

including many who had nothing to do with the insurgency. Elderly Tamils who are now in the diaspora remember the bodies of massacred Sinhala youths lying in piles on the roadsides, and any Sinhala youth was held suspect by the government, just as Tamil youths are today. The JVP also massacred people, mostly Sinhalese youths belonging or suspected of belonging to rival factions or groups.

Such factional violence in the south continues, although at a lower level than before.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the JVP has become a regular political party, holding seats in the Sri Lankan parliament. It has been among those Sinhala ethnonationalist parties that blame Tamils for the ills of the country; they strongly favor war against the LTTE and oppose a negotiated peace settlement.

The JVP insurgencies were a direct reaction to changes in economic and social policy. Hence the JVP directly attacked the government, and the government retaliated. But other, equally murderous riots in which the government was not a target, culminating in the giant pogroms against Tamils in 1983, met with no government opposition.

The severely destabilizing effect of the transition from socialist to neoliberal policies, combined with the ethnically biased political management of foreign aid capital during the 1970s, helped propel Sri Lanka into total war. The conjecture that economic liberalization has independently aggravated the war in Sri Lanka is supported by the fact that similar policies have helped to precipitate armed ethnic conflict in other countries.⁴⁵ Other causes are also at work in these conflicts: no social or economic force operates in a vacuum. But global capitalism is more powerful than any ethnic nationalism, and it turns what might have been liberating social forces against themselves, while creating others that are lethal from their inception.

Two Nationalisms

A third cause of the present conflict has been the simultaneous rise of Tamil nationalism and Sinhala nationalism. These forces are among the consequences of British colonial rule. Both Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms originated in opposition to British colonial practice and policy, which they recognized to be dominating and exploitative. Only later did they develop into mutual enmity. Ethnicity as we think of it today was not an issue in precolonial times because it did not exist. The notion of primordial enmities is viewed by most scholars as a politically motivated

rejection of current antagonisms into the distant past. Nevertheless, both nationalisms, in addition to being shaped by colonialist ways of knowledge, were composed of other streams, whose emergence predated the European colonial period.

These nationalisms became inevitable given the habit of the British rulers to denigrate the ways of life of people they ruled, while at the same time naturalizing the concept that people fit into such neat categories as Hindu or Buddhist, Tamil or Sinhalese.⁴⁶ A surprising number of otherwise intelligent people accepted the reality of such either/or categories as applied to themselves, while they could not help but resist the derogatory attributes attached to the categories.

Sinhala Buddhist nationalism arose in the late nineteenth century, in opposition to the activities of Christian missionaries. The missionaries preached that the local variant of Buddhism was savage and abhorrent demonolatry.⁴⁷ With support and encouragement from the colonial government, Christian missionaries established schools throughout the country in which children received high-quality education in the English medium, coupled with Christian indoctrination. The missionary schools became magnets for children whose parents sought a cosmopolitan education for their children.

But some Sinhala scholars, themselves with cosmopolitan educations, believed that Sinhala Buddhism was under attack from the missionaries and the British government. The language of the missionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries certainly substantiates the idea that it was under verbal attack. The Sinhala scholars also considered that Buddhism had declined in Sri Lanka during colonial rule. The community of Buddhist monks, some of whom exhibited powerful rhetorical skills in their debates with Christian missionaries, attracted the attention of Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, the nineteenth-century American spiritualist who subsequently founded the Theosophical Society in Madras, India. Olcott was so impressed with the tenets of Buddhism that he converted to that religion in Sri Lanka in 1880, and he was instrumental in popularizing Buddhism in the West. Olcott was also a good organizer, and he helped found a movement for the reform and revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka with a vision of a utopian, socially egalitarian Buddhist society. In this society, the monks and the monasteries would be “restored” to their rightful place as chief protectors and teachers of the people.⁴⁸

In the years preceding Sri Lankan independence in 1948, the monks became politically active in an unprecedented way. They agitated for the *sangha* to have a strong voice in government. Shortly after independence,

they achieved this goal. As political activists and voters, they could become what Americans call kingmakers. They were the determining force in the election of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike to the position of prime minister of Sri Lanka in 1956. This victory confirmed the Sinhala Buddhist clergy in their belief that, as a politically organized body, they could get anything they wanted. Some might say it was at this point that the Buddhist religion in Sri Lanka went by the wayside, at least with respect to the activities of monks, and the excesses of unchecked secular power took over.

Tamil nationalism began in India in the late nineteenth century and grew and evolved through the twentieth century. It was born together with what was called the Tamil Renaissance or the Dravidian Renaissance, which was sparked by the (re)discovery of Tamil Sangam poetry. Christian missionaries, most notably Bishop Robert Caldwell and Reverend G. U. Pope, considered classical Tamil poetry to be among the finest composed by anyone at any time anywhere in the world, reflecting the spirit of a great and admirable people. The fact that these men were both Christian clergy gave weight to their strong appreciation of ancient Tamil poetry. Tamil nationalism crystallized around the rich heritage of Tamil poetry and language.

At first Tamil nationalism was part of anticolonial pan-Indian nationalism, but it later split from the Indian nationalist movement in response to its perceived domination by north Indians. In particular, Tamil speakers were offended when Indian nationalists proposed Hindi rather than English as the national language. At least with English as a lingua franca, all Indian languages would be on an equal footing within the country.

Ardent devotion to the Tamil language became ardent devotion to the people who spoke it, by those very people. The movement merging love of the language with love of the people has been called Dravidianism. In the words of one somewhat detached scholar:

The most passionate and radical of all the regimes, Dravidianism routinely elicited from its adherents declarations of willingness to give up their wealth, their lives and their souls for Tamil. It also produced some antagonistic, even violent, attitudes toward other languages and their speakers, as for instance in the following verse published by Bharatidasan: "Our first task is to finish off those who destroy [our] glorious Tamil! / Let flow a river of crimson blood." Its emphasis on fierce public displays of devotion meant that images of battlefields, of blood, and of death proliferate in Dravidianist discourse. True Tamilians are those . . . who show their commitment to their mother-tongue by putting their very bodies on the line, and dying for it, if need be.

The sense of bodily belonging is inherent in such devotion. The notion of race is a bodily notion. Hence, “Dravidianism’s driving imperative was a vision of the Tamil community as an autonomous racial and political entity (*inam*), whose sacral center is occupied solely by Tamil.”⁴⁹

There were several distinct Tamil nationalist movements, but all of them celebrated the Tamil language as part of the Dravidian linguistic group. North Indian languages, including Hindi, are all part of a larger language family infelicitously labeled “Indo-Aryan.” European scholars and rulers of India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries considered Aryans to be superior to Dravidians, and those who were classed as Aryans were happy to share this view. Aryans were also considered lighter-skinned than Dravidians — clearly a point in favor of the Aryans from the colonial point of view.

A pan-Dravidian separatist movement was initiated in India by the great Tamil reformer E. V. Ramaswamy, or Periyar (1879–1973). His aim was to unite all the southern Indian states, and all Dravidian speakers, under one banner. Periyar was a staunch atheist and humanist. On the walls of some Tamil houses even today hangs a picture of the bearded old man with a saying in Tamil beneath it: *Kadavulai mara, manithanai ninai* (Forget God, think of Man). A modified version of Periyar’s totally antireligious stance emerged in the Self-Respect Movement of the mid-twentieth century. In this view, Tamils could and did practice their traditional religion, but without Brahman priests (who traced at least their religious tradition from north India), and using Tamil rather than Sanskrit in the ceremonies. Many Self-Respect marriages were celebrated. Cross-caste marriages and dowry-free marriages were practiced in a similar reformist spirit.

The pan-Dravidian movement initiated by Periyar is said to have failed because Periyar attempted to unite all of South India against the north, which was an unrealistic aim, and because Periyar rejected all religion, whereas most Tamils are deeply religious. Nevertheless, Periyar’s staunch atheism has been adopted by more than a few educated Tamils, and the anticaste and antidowry movements continue.

A specifically Tamil nationalism was championed by the writer and orator C. N. Annadurai (1909–69). The leaders of the Tamil Renaissance were all reformers who promoted a casteless, classless society. All were great speakers and writers. All were charismatic. But Annadurai was the most popular of all of these, inspiring widespread devotion.

In 1964 and 1965, nine young Tamil men took their own lives, six by fire and three by poison, declaring in their last words that their sacrifice

was for the sake of Tamil.⁵⁰ This collective devotional self-immolation demonstrated the intensity of the young men's *pattu/bhakti*; it mirrored legendary acts of self-sacrificial devotion attested in early literature, and it presaged the levels of self-sacrificial devotion that would later be attained by the LTTE.

But despite the passionate devotion, despite the violent words, and despite the call for a Tamil or Dravidian state independent of India, no armed insurrection and no mob violence ever arose in India from this movement — only violence against the self. In the end, the Indian Tamil nationalists achieved their goals by political means and by the strength of their voting numbers. No insurrection or secession was necessary. The status of their language and their right to speak it were not threatened. They were not invaded or occupied by a government army. They were not forcibly displaced from their homes. And for very few was war or political separation something inherently desirable. The painful lessons of the partition of Pakistan from India had been learned.

Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka took a different direction. From at least the time of independence, Sri Lankan Tamils distinguished themselves from Indian Tamils. Thus when Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka were denied voting privileges immediately after independence — on the grounds that they had been “recently” imported by the British to act as plantation laborers (even though many of them had lived on the island for generations, and had had voting rights during British rule) — Tamils who identified themselves as indigenous to Sri Lanka raised few objections. Thus the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils lost an important bloc of allies, who subsequently were granted voting rights again.

For Sri Lankan Tamils, an early and ominous turning point came with the proclamation of the Sinhala-Only Act in 1956, shortly after S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was elected. This act established Sinhala as the official language of the country. Tamils strongly objected, and Tamil leaders staged a *satyagrāha* in Colombo, which was met with violent repression.

A second move against Tamils came two years later. “In May 1958, a rumor that a Tamil had killed a Sinhalese sparked off nationwide communal riots. Hundreds of people, mostly Tamils, died. This disturbance was the first major episode of communal violence on the island since independence. The riots left a deep psychological scar between the two major ethnic groups. The government declared a state of emergency and forcibly relocated more than 25,000 Tamil refugees from Sinhalese areas to Tamil areas in the north.”⁵¹ A third ominous incident came in September 1959, with the assassination of Bandaranaike by a Buddhist monk for his pro-

posal of moderate local concessions to Tamils with regard to the Sinhala-Only Act. This was the same Bandaranaike whom the Buddhist monks had helped put in power three years before. The monk who assassinated him acted under the sponsorship of one of the most prominent leaders of the *sangha*. The concessions for which Bandaranaike was killed included “allowing the opportunity for persons trained in English or Tamil to take examinations in those languages for entry into public service, letting local bodies decide for themselves the language of their business, and giving persons the right to communicate with the government in their own language.”⁵² The two main political parties in Sri Lanka, the UNP (United National Party) and the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party), have been careful ever since not to upset the Sinhala ultranationalists, even as they vie for the support of the Sinhala majority.

Subsequent blows to Tamils — particularly Jaffna Tamils — included the introduction in 1974 of a new procedure for allocating university places, which took into account not only exam scores but also regional proportionality. In practice this meant that Tamil communities, for whom education was the only means of advancement and which had always done well on exams, were discriminated against in favor of rural students whose scores were lower. No significant portion of the Sinhala community was negatively affected by this legislation, but Jaffna Tamils found their traditional livelihoods and ways of life both insulted and threatened. For some of them, the last straw was the burning of the Jaffna library in 1981 by one or two hundred rampaging Sinhalese police. The library contained numerous irreplaceable manuscripts.

After 1983

Following the events of July 1983, tens of thousands of young Tamil men and women went to war. Training camps were set up for them in India and some of the Arab countries. The prime minister of India from 1984, Rajiv Gandhi, tacitly allowed and perhaps even actively supported the training camps in India. Some say that Gandhi sympathized with the Tamil militants. Others say he simply wanted to destabilize Sri Lanka.

The Tamil militant movement grew and then split because of a quarrel between Velupillai Prabhakaran and his best friend, Uma Maheswaran. Subsequent splits among the Tamil militants ensued. All of them were armed and trained in combat, and they fought one another fiercely. Some Tamil civilians who remember that time describe it as “teenagers

killing teenagers.” Each group had its own ideology, but, more than ideology, personal loyalties prevailed. In the end Prabhakaran came out ahead, not least because of his willingness to kill former friends who had betrayed him, along with their followers. Ultimately most of the other Tamil nationalist movements became political parties and joined the Sri Lankan government. A number, however, retained paramilitary groups that fought against the Tigers.

The LTTE developed and refined its skills and knowledge as the years passed. It got very good at blowing things up and carrying out assassinations. It developed an elite corps of Black Tigers (suicide bombers), with more volunteers than could be accepted.⁵³ It ambushed and killed soldiers and raided army bases and police stations. The Sri Lankan army and other security forces ballooned in size and strength to meet this challenge. Arms and equipment were sold or donated to Sri Lanka by foreign countries, including India. The LTTE, on the other hand, received support from elsewhere.⁵⁴ In 1987, the president of Sri Lanka, Julius Jayawardene, signed an agreement with Rajiv Gandhi that Indian peace-keeping troops (IPKF) should come in and settle the discord between the LTTE and government troops in Sri Lanka. The Tamil political party, TULF, welcomed the intervention. However, Jayawardene and the TULF had different expectations of the IPKF. There was concern in some quarters of the Sri Lankan government that India might use its military presence in Sri Lanka to annex the smaller country. The Tamils, for their part, after having joyfully welcomed the IPKF, quickly found that the Indian troops were fighting them and committing human rights abuses (rape and torture) against Tamil civilians. As in 1983, many ordinary Tamil people who did not think of themselves as warlike turned themselves into warriors. Those who could not physically fight supported the LTTE in any other way they could. And again many people fled the country to join the growing diaspora. In 1989, with the backing of the new president, Ranasinghe Premadasa, the LTTE drove the IPKF out of India.

Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a suicide bomber in Tamil Nadu in 1991. Premadasa was killed in a bomb explosion in 1993. Prabhakaran is presumed to have been behind both killings. The assassination of Rajiv shocked the Indian people, and many Indian Tamils who previously sympathized with the LTTE withdrew their support.

In 1994 Chandrika Kumaratunga, the daughter of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and head of the SLFP, was elected to the presidency by a strong margin on a promise to end the war and bring peace. She assumed office at the beginning of 1995. Talks between Chandrika’s representatives and

LTTE representatives failed, however, and soon the LTTE was back at war with the Sri Lankan military. The SLA staged Operation Riviresa (Sunshine), whose aim was to capture Jaffna from the LTTE, and “liberate” the Tamil civilians there. The LTTE did not put up a fight but moved to the Vanni jungle area south of the Jaffna peninsula. Many civilians fled the advance of the army, joining the LTTE in the Vanni. The Sri Lankan Army occupied (and continues to occupy) Jaffna.

However, because most of the army’s forces had been sent to the north to capture and occupy Jaffna, the LTTE was able to take full control of the hinterlands of the eastern Batticaloa and Amparai areas. By 1997, the LTTE had consolidated its control of this region, although the SLA maintained control of the coastal cities. Both the LTTE and the SLA continued to focus on the north. In 1997, the SLA initiated Operation Jayasikurui to capture the stretch of highway from Vavuniya (controlled by the army) through the Vanni (controlled by the Tigers) to Jaffna (controlled by the army). After his easy victory in Riviresa, the commander of the armed forces anticipated that Jayasikurui would be just as easy. But this time the Tigers fought tooth and nail. They were trained, experienced, and committed, and they used all the strength they had withheld during Riviresa.

I entered Batticaloa for the first time in March 1996, right after Riviresa and a little more than a year before Jayasikurui. Chapter 3 tells what I found there. The remaining chapters of this book describe what I learned when I came back to stay longer and Jayasikurui was in full swing.