

EXCURSUS 1

Trevor Fishlock on SRI LANKA: PARADISE LOST

In newspaper headlines and travel brochures Sri Lanka is always a paradise island. Its old name, Serendip, gave us, through Horace Walpole's coining, the word serendipity. It is lush, sunny, fertile, and beautiful. How sad, then, that it should now be so blighted a country.

During a recent visit to Colombo, the capital, and to Jaffna, the chief city of the northern province, I became convinced that a tragedy is in the making. Sri Lanka is at a dangerous crossroad. There has always been a certain uneasiness in the relationship between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, but today that relationship is thoroughly poisoned. The government is at war with Tamil terrorists in the north of the country, and the clumsy and ill-prepared government forces are conducting a severe and remorseless campaign of intimidation among the Tamil population in general. Attempts at a political solution to a bitter conflict having failed, the country is permeated by pessimism and stumbles in darkness toward intensified communal strife.

Sri Lanka's present turmoil and unhappiness have their roots in more than 2,500 years of history, but more immediately in the events that have taken place since British rule ended in 1948 and the country, then known as Ceylon, became independent.

The Sinhalese, who are Buddhists, form seven-tenths of a population of 15 million. The Tamils, who are Hindu, form about a fifth. (The remainder are Muslims or the descendants of European settlers, known as Burghers.) The key to understanding Sinhalese suspicion of the Tamils, and the

desire to assert their authority, is the fact that they are a majority with a minority complex. The Sinhalese see the Tamils of Sri Lanka not so much as a minority but as one with the 50 million Tamils of Tamil Nadu state in southern India, which lies only fifteen miles away across the Palk Strait. The Sinhalese feel this Tamil weight and proximity very acutely. They have an historic fear of Tamil domination, even invasion from India.

Throughout their cohabitation of the island, Sinhalese and Tamils have rarely integrated. Few in either community speak the other's language, and there has been little intermarriage. Although both communities have spread throughout the country, the north and parts of the eastern coast have been, and remain, Tamil strongholds. The Jaffna area, for example, is about 97 per cent Tamil.

In colonial times Christian missionaries established themselves in Tamil areas and gave Tamils English-language education, which fitted them well for government service and commerce and compensated them to some extent for the relative aridity of the north compared with the fertility of the south. After independence the Sinhalese began increasingly to assert themselves. In 1956 the seeds of renewed strife were planted with the enactment of a law making Sinhalese the sole official language. A member of Parliament warned then that Ceylon could have two languages—Sinhalese and Tamil—and one nation or find itself with one language and two nations. In 1972 the government put through constitutional reforms that accorded a special place to the Buddhist religion and gave the country its official Sinhalese name of Sri Lanka. The insistence on the preeminence of Sinhalese also undermined the status of English and further hurt the country by eroding the linguistic bridge between the two communities. Tamils felt the blow to English very keenly.

The two communities became steadily more polarized.



The Sinhalese Buddhist clergy, which has a strong antipathy to Tamils and much influence among Sinhalese people, insisted that the Sinhalese ascendancy should be strongly buttressed. The Tamils responded by calling for regional autonomy and with it a recognition of their language and identity. But Sinhalese hardliners were adamant in their refusal.

When I first visited Sri Lanka in 1980, it was plain the storm was brewing, though there was still time to maneuver. In 1975 a number of young Tamils had turned to terrorism to reinforce the demand for a separate Tamil state, and the forces moved in to fight. The government made the mistake of terming the Tamil question a terrorist problem rather than a communal one. In 1978 the government had damaged a negotiating link with the Tamils by enacting a constitutional amendment that required all members of Parliament to swear allegiance to an undivided country. The fourteen Tamil members, all of whom belonged to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and had been elected on a platform of Tamil separatism, refused to swear and were ousted from Parliament.

In July, 1983, following the killing of soldiers in Jaffna, Sinhalese mobs turned on Tamils in Colombo. In an orgy of arson and murder, four hundred people died and a hundred thousand lost their homes. In the north the army and police, largely Sinhalese, stepped up their campaign of intimidation, terrorizing by random murder, indiscriminate shooting, beatings, and plunder. The Sri Lanka Army is little more than a rabble. It was never trained or equipped for counterinsurgency work. Inevitably, its excesses have earned the forces the hatred of even moderate Tamils.

Early last year President Jayewardene proposed an all-party conference to find a way out of the morass. During December it collapsed. This was inevitable, since it was always plain that the most the Sinhalese would give would be less than the Tamils would accept. And, in fact, proposals for a limited devolution were rejected as too meager by the TULF and as too progressive by the Buddhist clergy. They were also rejected by the main opposition party. The president, it seems, had painted himself into a corner. He is seventy-eight, and although the question "After Jayewardene, who?" is unspoken, there is no doubt that leading politicians have an eye to the future and want to show the majority that they are tough on Tamils.

In the week that this political initiative died, I traveled 250 miles from Colombo to Jaffna by rail. The government had warned me of danger, and, indeed, I could find no taxi driver in Colombo willing to make the trip north.

I had been to Jaffna in 1981 and now found it much changed. Military restrictions and a curfew, not to mention the fear that the army evidently instills, have all but shut down the economy. The sea itself has been declared out of bounds for more than 25,000 fishermen. Church and civic leaders told me that unless food was brought in, the fishing communities would begin to starve.

Women have been selling their jewelry to buy food, but dealers in Jaffna said they no longer had any money with which to buy it. Many thousands of people have fled to India. A deputation of doctors told me that the city hospital was running out of drugs, anaesthesia, and oxygen. People were dying, particularly after heart attacks or birth complications, because they could not be taken to the hospital during the 6 p.m.-5 a.m. curfew.

Thousands of youths have been rounded up and held in camps, where some are beaten and tortured. There is no longer any proper law enforcement in Jaffna because the police dare not go out on patrol. The north is in a state of chaos and high nervous tension. Tamils believe the army is being used to subjugate them.

There are thought to be between one and five thousand terrorists, who wage war by mining roads and ambushing army patrols. Sri Lanka says, and India denies, that Tamil terrorists get their training in India and that India can help matters by choking this supply line.

The journey back to Colombo by train was tense. The train would not be leaving from Jaffna because the army had stopped it at a town thirty miles down the line. It was necessary to cadge a car and buy black market gasoline to get to the appropriate town, and the trip took me over a badly cratered road. There was a strong force of troops on the train, and before we set off for Colombo they opened fire, shooting toward the jungle and then running for cover. Tamils on the train said this was an attempt to impress us. By and by, the train stopped at an army base and soldiers offloaded tins and parcels they said were explosives that had been laid on the track by terrorists. They ordered a number of passengers out to inspect these parcels, saying "See how your people try to kill us." During the long journey through the night, restless and nervous soldiers moved constantly up and down the train.

A few days after I left Sri Lanka the Colombo train was blown up. More than thirty soldiers and a number of civilians were killed.

Trevor Fishlock, New York Bureau Chief of The Times, London, was that paper's India correspondent from 1980 to 1983. He is the author of Gandhi's Children, a study of contemporary India.

EXCURSUS 2

Sumit Ganguly on MR. GANDHI'S VICTORY

For those states that hold truly free and fair elections, particularly in the developing world, postelection analysis is a major preoccupation of journalists and scholars alike. The recent elections in India provide occasion for such exercises, and indeed many are under way. The vast majority of these analyses tend to attribute the success of Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress I party to two major factors: the so-called "sympathy factor"—an outpouring of grief in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination; and the "Hindu backlash" theory—that Hindus voted en masse for the Congress I party because they felt it best represented their interests at a time when the nation was being wracked by communal violence. Furthermore, the backlash theory asserts that the prime minister and the Congress I party actively capitalized on Hindu communal sentiment.

Clearly, the sympathy factor did play some role in propelling Mr. Gandhi to victory. However, as an opposition politician aptly—if uncharitably—pointed out, it was Rajiv's