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Sri Lanka

History of the National Conflict in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is the name of the island earlier known as Ceylon and situated at the Southern extremity of the Indian Subcontinent, separated from it at its narrowest point by 22 miles of sea called the Palk Strait.

It covers an area of 25,322 square miles almost the size of Ireland or Tasmania and has a population of 18 million. Both the Sinhala and the Tamil nations co-existed in the island for over 2,500 years, and shared the rule of the island separately. Population ratio is approximately 74% Sinhala speaking and 26% Tamil speaking: Of the Sinhalese 93 % are Buddhists and 7% Christians. Of the Tamil speakers, 60 % are Hindus, 28 % Muslims and 12 % Christians.

The sources of the national conflict in Sri Lanka are historical, economic, cultural & religious. In the words of David Selbourne of Ruskin College, Oxford, it is "a true national question, if ever there was one".

Both the Tamil People & Sinhalese people are indigenous people of Sri Lanka. Early history records that they had their own monarchs and kingdoms. They were conquered by the colonial powers separately and in different periods in history. They existed as separate communities until the British brought them together in 1883 under a single administration (for the very first time in their long history).

The European Colonial Era

1505 - Arrival of Portuguese - They first occupied the low country Sinhalese areas in the south west of the Island.

1621 - Jaffna Tamil Kingdom fell to the Portuguese (more than a century later).

1656 - Dutch occupied areas which were under Portuguese control.

1802 - Treaty of Amiens - Dutch possessions ceded to the British.

1815 - The Sinhalese Kandyan Kingdom in the central parts conquered by the British, having annexed the Tamil Vanni Kingdom in the north.

1833 - The British unified the island based on the recommendations of Colebrook - Cameron Commission (purely for administrative convenience).

1931 - Donoughmore constitution - State Council elected by Universal suffrage (the first people to exercise universal suffrage in Asia).

1947 - Soulbury constitution adopted & general elections held for the parliament of Ceylon.

The Sinhala-Colonial Era

1948 - British grant independence under the Soulbury constitution.

The parliament, with its entrenched Sinhalese majority, legislates to disenfranchise Tamils of [recent] Indian origin who have lived there for generations and have always exercised their franchise. The Tamil people lost almost half of their representation in the parliament. The state aided colonisation of Sinhalese people in Tamil areas promoted to annex Tamil homelands and further reduce Tamil representation in the parliament.

1956 - The Sinhalese Language was made the only official language by legislation, disadvantaging Tamil people in dealing with the state administration and denying them equal access to education and employment.

1957 - Bandaranaike - Chelvanayakam Pact between the Sinhalese Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike and Tamil leader SJV Chelvanayakam QC to meet some of the demands of the Tamil people.

1958 - The Pact was unilaterally abrogated by the Sinhalese Prime Minister to pacify the extreme elements among the Sinhalese Buddhists. (He is the father of the President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Kumaratunga (1995 -) He was assassinated by a Buddhist monk for his pact with the Tamils in 1959.

1965 - Senanayake - Chelvanayakam Pact - entered into, with another Sinhalese Prime minister Dudley Senanayake, and was never implemented by the Sinhalese government.

1969 - The Privy Council in London directs the Supreme Court in Sri Lanka to review the constitutionality of the Official Language Act, since it violated s.29(2) the constitution.

1971 - The government responds by abolishing appeals to Privy Council. The Tamil people's only avenue to seek justice through independent judiciary came to an end.

1972 - The new Republican Constitution was adopted and imposed on the Tamil people without their consent

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The only legal safeguard provided by the entrenched section 29(2) of the Soulbury constitution, described by the Privy Council in London that they "represent the solemn balance of rights between the citizens of Ceylon, the fundamental condition on which inter se they accepted the constitution; and these are therefore unalterable under the constitution", was scrapped.

Tamil parties walked out of the constituent assembly. With this Tamil participation of the democratic process in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) came to an end.

1973 - Through a process of standardization the government restricts entry of Tamil students to universities and institutions of higher education.

1974 - The 4th International Tamil literary conference in Jaffna was broken up by the police, where many died and several were injured.

1976 - All the main Tamil political parties unite under the leadership of SJV Chelvanayakam QC and at their First National Convention declare:

"The Convention resolves that the restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist state of Tamil Eelam based on the right of self-determination inherent to every nation has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil nation in this country."

1977 - Historical mandate of the Tamil people - The Tamil people gave a clear mandate at the general elections to establish their sovereignty. The manifesto called for:

"... in the general Election the mandate of the Tamil Nation to establish an independent, sovereign, secular, socialist State of Tamil Eelam that includes all the geographically contiguous areas that have been the traditional homeland of the Tamil-speaking people in the country."

"The Tamil nation must take the decision to establish its sovereignty in its homeland on the basis of its right to self-determination. The only way to announce this decision to the Sinhalese Government and to the world is to vote for TULF. The Tamil-speaking

representatives who get elected through these votes while being members of the National State Assembly of Tamil Eelam which will draft a constitution for the state of Tamil Eelam and establish the independence of Tamil Eelam by bringing that constitution into operation either by peaceful means or by direct action or struggle".

The Tamil resolution also called on

"The Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully in the sacred fight for freedom and flinch not till the goal of a sovereign socialist state of Tamil Eelam is reached".

(The Sinhalese Prime Minister of Sri Lanka from 1970 to 1977 was Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranalke the present Prime Minister and the mother of the President Chandrika Kumaratunge [1995 -).

The Anti-Tamil Violence - The Tamil people have been subjected periodically to communal violence. There have been anti-Tamil riots and pogroms in 1956, 1958, 1977 and culminating in the 1983 massacres and holocaust.

Military occupation & Police brutality - First in 1961 and then in 1974, 1979, 1981 and from 1983. Many historical monuments including temples and churches were destroyed. (Attested in two reports by the International Commission of Jurists, and in several other reports of independent international human rights organisations).

The armed struggle by the LTTE on behalf of the Tamil people arose as a rebellion against the tyranny of the Sinhalese state and its brutal repression of Tamil people. It is a just cause in pursuance of their democratic aspirations, and the historic mandate, and therefore is lawful.

1983 - Sri Lanka commenced arbitrary arrests and detention without trial, torture and rape, violence against women, summary executions of the Tamil people. The era of mass exodus of Tamil refugees internally and internationally begins.

1987 - UN Resolution on Sri Lanka country situation for violation of Human Rights. Unsuccessful Indo Sri Lanka Accord and the occupation of Tamil territories by Indian

Army. India commenced deliberate and indiscriminate bombing and shelling of Tamil territories.

1990 - Withdrawal of Indian Forces. Unsuccessful Negotiations with United National Party Government. Sri Lanka recommenced deliberate and indiscriminate bombings of Tamil territories. Economic Embargo enforced to the North and part of the East.

1995 to date - Unsuccessful Negotiations with People Alliance Government, with resumption of the war.