

A study of social consequences of ethnic conflict in the North-East of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper discusses social consequences of the north-east conflict. It is a well-known fact that Sri Lanka in recent time, has become synonymous with political violence and terror. Therefore, traditions of civil society and democracy have been seriously eroded. The genesis of this violence was the decision of numerous ethnic Tamil youth groups to take up arms against the Sinhala dominated Sri Lankan State, in order to alleviate what they perceived as discriminatory practices directed towards them. In fact, central feature in the recent history of Sri Lanka is the long and bitter conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. This ethnic conflict developed into a war in 1983. The proximate cause was the death of 13 soldiers in July 1983 in a landmine explosion followed by violence against Tamils in Sinhala areas. It has been reported that more than 600 Tamil civilians were killed and that the property of many Tamils was destroyed or looted. In this situation more than any other problem in recent times, I would suggest that the issue of ethnic conflict in north and east has impacted most severely on the lives of north-east people on a routine basis. But, there is very little information dealing with issues of impact of violence or how people cope with consequences of it. In this article, an attempt has been made to fill this gap by conducting a literature survey.

One of the most long-lasting and less understood consequences of political violence in the north-east has been the impact on children. In many cases, the continuing political violence has robbed children of their very childhood and their human rights too. Another clear segment of the population in which political violence has impacted is women. In this initial period of militarization of the inter-ethnic conflict, women were victimized in several ways. Another major consequence of the conflict in north-east was the large scale displacement of people in the region. Many of them have become refugees in Sri Lanka itself as well as in other parts of the world. The psychological impact on human beings in this region too has become a major consequence. Constant violence related rape, living in fear and uncertainty, chronic socio-political instability, disruption to property etc. have taken a serious toll on humans. During the last few years, the war has almost completely disrupted the economy in that region. The conflict also posed a serious threat to the democratic system of government in the island. It has militarized the civil society. Its impact on the economic development of the country has been grave. Although so many political strategies have been taken to solve this problem by the political leaders, the conflict is still continuing. The study concludes that if this conflict prevails without a reasonable and suitable solution, the above mentioned social consequences would certainly aggravate in the future.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Militarization, Demographic patterns, Displacement.

Introduction

The central feature in the recent history of Sri Lanka is the long and bitter conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. Serious outbreaks of violence between the two communities, particularly against Tamils, were frequent between 1956 and 1983. This escalated into a full-blown war between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil separatist militants. Therefore, Sri Lanka in recent times has become synonymous with political violence and terror.

In this analysis I would be focusing on the following inter-related themes.

- A summary of how and why north- east conflict has become such a central aspect of contemporary Sri Lankan life.
- The impact of that ethnic conflict on the day today life of north- east people including women and children.
- The impact of the conflict on economic development of the war affected areas in particular and in the country in general.

Demographic patterns of Sri Lanka

In a multi - ethnic, multi - religious pluralist society, ethnic competition and rivalries are natural phenomena. When there is a failure to manage this competition within reasonable limits, these can be developing into armed conflict (Liyanage, 1993). According to recent (1981) statistics, the population of Sri Lanka can be categorized in the following manner.

The Sinhalese constitute 73.95% (10,980,000) of the population. Sri Lankan Tamils account for 12.70% (1,887,000); Indian Tamil make up 5.52% (819,000); Muslims constitute 7.05% (1,047,000); Burghers make up 0.26% (39,000); Malays, followers of Islam, account for 0.32% (47,000); numerous other small groups make up 0.19% (28,000) (Department of Census and Statistics, 1998).

Within these ethnic groups there are clear religious divisions as well. Buddhist, who are Sinhalese, make up 69.30% (10,288, and 3). Hindus, who are Tamils (Sri Lankan and Indian) constitute 15.48% (2,298.8). Muslims are the only ethnic group in Sri Lanka who have a single term to denote ethnicity and religion. They and Malays, who are also Muslims by religion, account for 7.55% (1,121.7) of the population. Christians, including Burghers and a minority of Tamils and Sinhalese account for 7.61% (1,130.6) (Department of Census and Statistics, 1988: 12-14).

Of these ethnic and religious groups, Tamil Hindus predominated in the Northern Province and maintained a significant presence in the eastern province. The Eastern province is an ethnically mixed area where Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese were found in sizeable numbers even though Tamils have a slightly higher statistical edge over others. Indian Tamils who are the descendants of laborers brought from Southern India by the British in the 19th century to work in their tea and coffee estates, are concentrated in parts of Central Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces. Sinhala Buddhists predominate in all parts of the country, except northern and eastern provinces. Muslims have a significant concentration in the eastern province but on average they are scattered throughout the country.

The Emergence of Ethnic conflict

According to my own judgement, this type of demographic patterns of Sri Lanka is the main cause for the ethnic conflict in the north and east. According to the view of Liyanage (1998), the roots of the current ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka are of recent origin and may be traced back to the constitutional reform movement in the 1930s and 1940s. The underlying causes of the conflict are complex and manifold and extend to the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. He has confined himself - here to a brief listing of seven main causes.

- the exclusion of Tamils from political power in post - colonial Sri Lanka
- discrimination against Tamils over language
- reduced representation of Tamils in public sector employment

- restrictions on Tamil in respect of university places
- land settlement programs designed to increase Sinhalese population in the Northern and Eastern provinces
- broken promises by Sinhala political parties
- the rise of Tamil ethnic - nationalism

Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is strictly a 20th century phenomenon with only a very few of its roots directly traceable to Sri Lanka's hazy ancient history. In many plural societies, in times of social economic and political difficulties, it is not unusual to see one ethnic group becoming the target of another's frustration (Perera, 1998). In this regard Sri Lanka is no exception. Sri Lanka has a clear 20th century tradition of ethnic conflict in times of economic and social difficulties. In all instances, violent was unleashed upon minorities by the Sinhala majority. These conflicts hardly were the result of long and well- established antagonism while exploitable immediate causes always existed, most conflict were the creations of vote - seeking politicians (Perera, 1998). Similar violent incidents involving Tamils and Sinhalese have occurred in 1957, 1977, 1978 and the most violent and destructive of these took place in July 1983. Many observers see the violence of July 1983 as a turning point in the conflict in the last twelve years. The war almost completely disrupted the civil administration in the Northern Province and, to a lesser extent, in the Eastern Province (Perera, 1998). It has destroyed lives and property, and driven a large number of people from their homes. The conflict also posed a serious threat to the democratic system of government in the island. It has militarized the civil society. Its impact in the economic development of the country has been grave (Perera, 1998).

The impact of the ethnic conflict on children

One of the long lasting and as yet not properly understood consequences of the political violence in the north-east has been the impact on children. According to available estimates, by 1993 about 400,000 children had been displaced in the north- east due to the prevailing condition of violence and instability (Marga Institute, 1994). The law and society trust in Colombo quoting a UNICEF investigation report has shown that children in the region were seriously affected psychologically by the trauma of war and displacement. Their emotional response to the prevailing condition included extreme sadness, fear, anger and irritable behavior, and lack of hope, particularly in older and adolescent children. In addition, an increase in physical symptoms related to stress has also been reported along with fear and difficulty in dealing with routing matters, withdrawal from routine activities at home and school as well as from other reasons, and withdrawal into conflict related fantasies (Law and Society Trust, 1996).

Under the prevailing conditions, the LTTE actively recruits children as young as 10 years into their Baby Brigade. It is quite common to encounter children less than 15 years, trained in the use of firearms that are also use in combat situations and for sentry duty. Observers have noted that in 1995 the recruitment of children into the fighting ranks of the LTTE intensified. In fact when over 200 LTTE members died while trying to overrun four army camps in the Weli Oya area in the east in July 1995, it was discovered that many of the dead were children (Law and Society Trust, 1996). Eyewitness reports have also indicated that there were very young persons in the LTTE ranks, which attacked Sinhala border villages in the east. In October 1995 when the LTTE intensified its activities in the East with series of attacks against civilians in the East. The same report has also indicated that these children actively participated in the massacre of villagers including childre (Law and Society Trust, 1996).

Children have been either forcibly recruited by the LTTE or have run away from their homes to join the movement. The LTTE has actively organized recruitment drives in schools screening videos of successful

LTTE operations among other things to lure the children into the movement (Perera, 1998). The University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) in their Report No: 06 make the following observation regarding the recruitment of children and young women into the ranks of the LTTE.

“A large number of girls and children were recruited and flung into battle in reckless fashion with little understanding of the purpose and the lack of maturity to come to term with blown limbs and permanent disability. Once the original boyish sense of adventure has evaporated with injury, children bitterly cursed the movement and attempted suicide” (UTHR, 1991).

However, as the last observation in the above quotation suggests, there are also indications that many of the children who either joined the movement after their first and bitter experience with combat in a direct manner. The UTHR Report No 06 (1991) also indicated that contact within the LTTE has reported that a large number of adolescents wish to leave the organization, many of whom are in the age group between 16 - 18 (UTHR 1991).

The other problem is that the war has disrupted the education of the children, which is another reason why they were attracted to the glitter of weapons. The LTTE send their military representatives to school to recruit children. On the other hand children in the age group of 16 and under, know nothing other than war and constant conflict unlike their elder kins who could refer back to a period of peace and relative stability and security (Perera 1998)

The impact of the ethnic conflict on women

Another clear segment of the population on ethnic political violence has impacted seriously are women. Sexual attacks on women have been a common military strategy throughout history. (Lewis, 1999) In the initial periods of the militarization of the inter - ethnic conflict, women were victimized when their husbands or other male kins were abducted or killed by the security forces. They became widows or bereaved women. They also fell victim to rape, and the worst period of rape was under the occupation of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), particularly between the months of November and December 1987 when the refugees were trickling back from their camps to the homes they had left behind in the midst of war (Hoole, 1990).

Comparatively the number of kidnapping of women, sexual harassment and rapes attributed to Tamil militant groups are minimal even though such cases also exist as indicated by a number of unpublished personal testimonies recorded by some researchers and human rights activists. (Perera, 1998). In conservative Tamil society, with privileged notions of chastity, virginity before marriage and restrictive notions of purity, women are placed in an extremely difficult position when many of these notions would be violated in a situation of rape. The fact that rape was not a result of their own activities plays no part in the popular perception of the rape victim, and the social seclusion of such victims. In fact they were victimized by more than one aggressor. That is firstly by the rapist, and then by their own society (Perera, 1998).

Problem of displacement

Another major consequence of the conflict in the north- east was the large-scale displacement of people in the region. Many of them have become refugees in Sri Lanka itself as well as in other parts of the world. In 1981, the Tamil population of Sri Lanka numbered 1,900,000 people, by 1995 almost three quarters of these were either internally displaced or have sought asylum overseas. About 160,000 Tamils from both the Northern and Eastern provinces are in Southern India, of

whom 50,000 are in camps and 55,000 of Hill country origin, who do not wish to return to Sri Lanka. Meanwhile another 700,000 are classified as displaced and receiving Sri Lankan government assistance in camps scattered throughout Sri Lanka. Among them 200,000 are in Colombo and its suburbs, and a further 320,000 people have sought political asylum in Europe and North America (Mc Dowell, 1996).

However, the problems of the refugees who are internally displaced are much more severe, and the sources of help for them are also relatively scarce. Refugees within Sri Lanka belonged to all ethnic groups. From the Eastern province thousands of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims have been displaced. From the Northern Province most of those displaced were Tamils and Muslims (Nissan, 1996, UTHR, 1996, 1993). On the other hand sanitary and health conditions in refugee camps have constantly deteriorated due to lack of funds as well as mismanagement and problematic perceptions on the part of officials. Refugee workers and other observers have constantly indicated that health conditions in these camps are inadequate. (Vevekanandan, 1996) This is most severely felt by women particularly in respect of pregnancy, childbirth and childcare and menstruation needs. Even though women as well as their kins who were on many camps have stressed on the importance of providing such facilities, their requests have not been considered (Vevekanandan, 1996). The main problem here is that for state authorities entrusted with organizing and running camps, the priorities are to direct people to camps, keep them there and find basic meals while they live there or convince them to return to their original villages. The kind of needs such as those mentioned above have no place in this list of priorities (Perera, 1998).

Actually the problem of refugees has become a serious one, with an estimated 450,000 Tamils living as refugees or asylum seekers overseas, with around half of them in India. One may argue that these asylum seekers were looking for greener pastures. However, their plight has to be understood in the context of harassment by the security forces, continuous suspicion by neighbors and general insecurity (Liyanage, 1999).

Psychological impact of the ethnic conflict

The other social consequence of ethnic conflict is psychological impact of the violence in the north-east people. In many instances of armed conflict and political violence, the peace of mind of a populace would be one of the first as well as one of the most long lasting but invisible casualties. This situation is no exception in the context of the political violence in Sri Lanka's north-east. Constant violence, rape, living in fear and uncertainty, chronic socio-political instability, disruption to property all have to take a serious toll on the human mind (Perera, 1998). Another recurring condition among the populace has been anxiety. On the other hand, many of the individuals who had this kind of symptoms due to anxiety have also suffered from sleep disturbances, anxiety, dreams where they see themselves being injured by military action or being chased by the armed forces, and nightmares (Hoole, 1990). In time of heightened military activity, nights have been reported to be the worst time. Many people spent the nights in terror as a result of anticipatory anxiety, that is the anxiety of not knowing when and where a shell would fall or when gunfire may emerge. In such situation some people have died of psychological shock. Moreover, the loud noise of exploding shells and cracking of gunfire have had tremendous impact on children as well, many of whom have become hypersensitive to loud noised (Hool, 1990).

While psychological disturbance cannot be presented statistically, the degree of psychological disturbance experienced by children during and after war may range from minor anxiety to extreme behavioural changes (Harris, 1999). War can exert profound effects on all aspects of a child's life. Social and psychological disturbances associated with children's war-related experiences commonly manifested in behaviors which include: sleep disorders; concentration impairment; nightmares; withdrawal; aggression; fear of unexpected

sounds and movement; clinging behavior; depression; inability to form close relationship; bed-wetting; stealing/lying; lack of trust in adults and/or other children; intrusive images and thoughts; fear and anxiety; a sense of isolation; chronic sadness and depression; pessimistic notions of what the future will bring; avoidance behavior; a sense of guilt that they were not able to help prevent death; and/or a preoccupation with the re-enactment of traumatic events in play and artistic expression (Bulwada, 1994).

Cost of the conflict in north- east

Other social consequence of north-east conflict is cost of the ethnic war, especially human cost of war. The data cover the period up to April 1995 when LTTE broke the ceasefire agreement. In 1995, the Sri Lankan military launched a massive military attack on the LTTE in the Jaffna peninsula. It has been reported that more than 2,000 security force personnel and militants were killed and that more than 4,000 were injured (Liyanage, 1999). A summary of human costs is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Human cost of the war 1981-April 1995

Year	<i>Security Forces</i>			<i>Separatist militants</i>			<i>Civilians</i>		
	Killed	Injured	Disappeared	Killed	Injured	Disappeared	Killed	Injured	Disappeared
1981	09	09	-	-	01	-	03	0	-
1982	10	07	-	-	01	-	05	0	-
1982	18	02	-	-	06	-	09	0	-
1983	98	55	-	-	34	-	253	0	-
1984	205	117	03	-	117	-	546	0	-
1985	237	324	-	-	1,139	-	576	0	-
1986	350	292	-	-	888	-	867	0	-
1987	491	51	03	-	435	-	629	0	-
1988	165	32	03	-	524	-	779	158	-
1989	952	594	182	1,461	2,358	549	961	380	-
1990	1,180	2,858	102	2,561	5,158	3,640	436	407	-
1991	1,518	1,251	48	881	2,920	363	677	538	-
1992	699	1,432	388	1,053	1,810	0	636	81	33
1993	261	693	38	402	106	33	83	116	56
1994	35	116	02	32	19	15	03	02	05
1995	6,228	7,833	769	6,390	15511	4,600	6,463	1,682	94

Source: *Ravaya* (Sinhala Weekly) 9 July 1995

Then, years of armed conflict have completely disrupted the economy of the Northern Province and to a lesser extent, that of the Eastern Province. Highways and roads, railways, electricity supply, post and telecommunication and irrigation system will have to be rebuilt. In addition to these structures, attention needs to be focused on human resources in general and education, vocational training, and health in particular. (Liyanage, 1999). Although education was not totally disrupted, there is no doubt that its quality has declined. Jaffna was well known for the high standard of its educational facilities. Jaffna municipality had one of the finest libraries in South Asia, but this was destroyed during the District Development Council election in 1981 (Liyanage, 1999).

Then, health services in the Northern Province are in a crisis situation, although data on levels of malnutrition spread of diseases and general health conditions are not available. Shelling and bombing by the security forces have often compelled the civilian population to move to safer areas, but where there is little by way of health facilities. The NGOs may contributed in these spheres but again the state has to play a major role (Liyanage, 1999).

Conclusion

Sri Lanka, the so-called "Paradise on earth" has a dark side too. The 20 year old conflict between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) has left more than 65,000 dead. About 800,000 people were displaced and many of them were disabled. While all Sri Lankans have suffered from the consequences of the conflict, the North - East and the adjacent areas have born the brunt of fighting.

Therefore, permanent peace has to be brought about, in order to change this situation in the North and East. For that, the government should play a major role on behalf of the governed. It means that a very suitable and a very reasonable political solution must be found to resolve this ethnic conflict. Since 1987, there have been several attempts to have a constitutional accommodation by successive Sri Lankan Governments and the advocates of Tamils nationalism. Although the cease-fire agreement was signed by the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE in 2002, the peace talks collapsed in April and by the end of that year the government and rebels had contradictory views over key political issues. On the other hand, after signing the cease-fire agreement in February 2002, bringing a measure of normalcy to the country, the vast majority of the affected people still suffer from the lack of basic infrastructure facilities and social services. Therefore, to come back to normal life, social services must be restored, destroyed infrastructure facilities must be rebuilt and access to job opportunities must be made available.

In this situation, all Sri Lankan political parties and all community groups should give their wholehearted support to bring about an everlasting peace and to work together for a prosperous and harmonious future for Sri Lanka. The state together with the civil society and the researchers in the universities and other institutions should undertake a serious study to ascertain the reasons for both the emergence of political violence and its continuity in Sri Lankan politics. Already some researchers have pointed out that the formal education system plays a disruptive role in promoting and justifying the inter-ethnic conflict in terms of the contents of text books, organization of schools and lapses in teacher-training (Perera, 1998). It means that Sri Lankan education system at school level or university level has not addressed these issues through formal education. In this context, it is imperative that the state should utilize the formal education system in the country by having serious reforms to address issues of violence and their consequences, so as to avoid threats to democracy and make use of non-violent means of conflict resolution.

The resolution of the ethnic conflict will restore peace in Sri Lanka and will pave the way for a prosperous country. If so, the Sri Lankan people would experience peace in the society, which is quite apparent there will be peace in the country, so that they would not create any social conflicts thereafter.

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