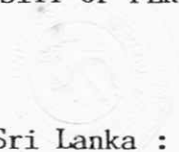


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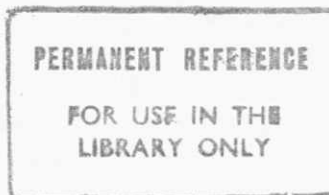


Minority Politics in Sri Lanka : Since Independence

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SynopsisMinority Politics in Sri Lanka Since Independence

The historical experience of human society reveals that different social groups having dominant subordinate relationship have persisted through centuries and generations upon generations. Although the progress of humanity has always given rise to such social groups, the concept of minority has assumed an increasing academic salience since World War I and particularly after World War II in developed as well as developing countries, because minority problems have become acute in many of them accelerating in the process internal instability and posing challenges to the integrative processes.

The word 'minority' in the sense it is used today goes back, according to the New English Dictionary to the second half of the eighteenth century. Gramatically, the term 'minority' is compound of the Latin word 'Minor' and suffix 'ity'. It means inter alia the smaller in number of the two aggregates. According to Rose, the minority is defined:

as a group of people - differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion or language - who both think themselves as a differentiated group and are thought by the others as a differentiated group with negative connotations.¹

1. Arnold M. Rose, International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences (1968). Vol.10 ed David L. Sills. (U.S.A.: The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, 1968), p. 365.

This study attempts to investigate minority politics in Sri Lanka since Independence. Sri Lanka presents us with a striking religious and linguistic congruence among the two largest ethnic groups, the Sinhalese who formed 74% of the total population in 1981 (a great majority of them 69.3% Buddhists) and Tamils who constituted 18.2% (Sri Lankan Tamils - 12.6% and Indian Tamils 5.6%), most of them are Hindus (15.5%)². The Sri Lankan Tamil minority, however, forms a majority in Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. They are socially and economically in a better position than Tamils of recent Indian origin, the great majority of whom are plantation workers.

The Sri Lankan Tamils enjoyed a dominant position in the public service and professions during the British colonial period and for sometime (till early 1950s) after Independence. But their position in the services and professions declined in the 1950s, particularly after the Sinhalese language was made the official language of Sri Lanka in 1956 by the S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike Government. On the other hand, the Indian Tamils have been fighting for their citizenship and voting rights since Independence, which were curtailed by the D.S. Senanayake Government in 1948 and 1949 through a series of laws.

Sri Lankan Tamils have been demanding autonomy for Tamil dominated areas since 1950. As opportunities for public service

2. Sri Lanka - Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, Sri Lanka 1981 (Colombo: Dept. of Census and Statistics, 1981), p. 2.

employment dwindled as a result of economic stagnation in the 1960s and 1970s, communal antagonism between the Tamils and the Sinhalese communities sharpened. The leaders of the Sri Lankan Tamil community complained that they were discriminated against by the Sinhalese dominated governments, in state employment, higher education, particularly in University education and land settlement. In the mid 1970s they shifted their demand from autonomy to one of separation. However, the Indian Tamils chose to co-operate with the Sinhalese leaders to find solutions to their problems.

Although, the Muslims in Sri Lanka who formed 7.1% of the population of Sri Lanka in 1981, are in general, backward, in education and feel neglected in many other social spheres of life, their leadership also chose to win the confidence of the Sinhalese majority to find amicable solutions to their outstanding problems.

The Sri Lankan Tamil problem became explosive in the 1970s and early 1980s due to the escalation of the violent activities of Tamil militants who are engaged in an armed struggle against the armed forces of the Sri Lankan state with the aim of creating a separate Tamil state - Eelam.

The focus of this study is directed towards finding answers to a number of questions, (i) why is it that a section of Sri Lankan Tamils are in favour of a separate state? (ii) why

are other minorities (including the Indian Tamils) not in favour of such a demand? (iii) why is segment of Tamil youth are engaged in an armed struggle to achieve Eelam? (iv) are the Tamils really discriminated against in the sphere of employment and educational opportunities? and (v) what are the implications of the transnational character of the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka?

This study is based on a systematic analysis of empirical evidence. The method of investigation used in this study is basically eclectic - attempting a judicious combination of the insight provided in various approaches.

The tools used in our study are the field observation method and interviews conducted among cross-section of the Sri Lankans - students, villagers, white collar workers, teachers, scholars and political leaders. The extensive use of secondary data has been made in addition to the primary sources such as the Parliamentary Debates of the House of Representatives of Sri Lanka, Special Commission of Inquiry concerning ethnic disputes or riots, Annual Reports of the Commissions and Departments and the Census and Statis Reports especially Consumer Finance Surveys of the Central Bank of Ceylon. Among the secondary sources, we have exploited the available data from the newspapers, articles, books, personal documents and election manifestos of political parties.