

Review Article

S. J. TAMBIAH'S SRI LANKA: ETHNIC FRATRICIDE AND THE DISMANTLING OF DEMOCRACY

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Sri Lanka, not long ago a model of democracy, economic development, and ethnic and religious toleration in South Asia, has recently begun to rival Lebanon as the "ethnic carnage house" of the Third World. This ethnic strife, between the majority Sinhalese and the largest minority Tamils, which began on a small and piecemeal basis in the late 1950s, has escalated into a fullscale war of secession, with the Tamil militants claiming the northern and eastern parts of the country as "Eelam"--the Tamil "homeland" -- and demanding a separate political status for it, and the national government responding with offers of devolution of authority and some degree of regional autonomy to the north and the east, as well as to other parts of the country. The militants, until quite recently, have refused to negotiate with the government on these latter issues, remaining adamant in their extreme position of nothing less than complete secession, and have resorted to the typical guerilla tactics of hit-and-run attacks on police and army posts and the ambushing of patrols and convoys in the north and the east. The government has reacted with bombing, strafing, and shelling of Tamil targets, ostensibly militant strongholds but surrounded by civilian areas, with the result that many innocent Tamils have died or been seriously injured in the conflict. The militants have retaliated with the typical "terrorist" tactics of planting bombs in predominantly Sinhalese areas, primarily in the capital city of Colombo, and massacring unarmed Sinhalese civilians in buses, villages, and religious sites in the north and east, with the three-fold purpose of taking revenge for government "atrocities," driving Sinhalese out of the ethnically heterogeneous east, and provoking an overreaction from the military, as well as from the general Sinhalese population, which is intended to polarize further the Tamil non-combatants into the extreme cause for an independent Eelam. The government has responded to these acts with increased military attacks on guerilla positions in the north and east, with the inevitable toll on Tamil civilian lives mounting; the terrorists retaliate; and the level and intensity of violence escalates ever upward.

But the darkest moment thus far in this ever worsening storm came in July, 1983, when in Colombo mobs of Sinhalese took to the streets, burning and looting Tamil businesses and residences and hacking to pieces any Tamil, regardless of age or sex, they came upon. This mayhem went on for the better part of three days, while the government, either by plan or shocked inaction, stood idly by and watched, the mad frenzy having largely spent itself when President Jayawardene finally decided to call a curfew. So unprecedented was this outburst in its ferocity throughout the long history of these otherwise peaceful and docile people, that it immediately became a watershed not only in the mounting conflict but also in scholarly attempts to explain how and why it happened. While most of these works comprise attempts by soul-searching Sinhalese scholars to reappraise the recent history of the ethnic conflict leading up to this egregious event, as well as to condemn it, there has been at least one Sri Lankan Tamil scholar to tackle the problem -- namely, S.J. Tambiah, the noted Harvard anthropologist.

Tambiah takes the 1983 riots as his point of departure in the book, providing a vivid and express description of them, his main point being to demonstrate that they were the work of *organized* mob violence, and that certain members of the government, most notably Cyril Mathew, the then Industries Minister, did the organizing, providing the gangs with voters' lists of names and addresses of Tamil residences and businesses and exhorting them to "go out and get 'em." He then explores their immediate, underlying causes -what he terms "dislocations" -- which he identifies as first, the "unevenness of economic development and the pauperization of the lower income groups" (p. 34), which resulted directly from the UNP (United National Party) government's recent attempts to "open up" the economic market and led to the growing disenchantment and anger of the Sinhalese urban poor. It was this anger, then that found as its easy target not the privileged Sinhalese class but the relatively successful urban Tamils and was thus ripe for political manipulation. Secondly, there was "the factional competition within the ruling party, combined with a government whose advance towards total power left no space for countervailing opposition groups as checks and balances, thereby encouraging neo-fascist tendencies within its own ranks" (Ibid). Tambiah argues that these tendencies are manifested in various steps taken by the ruling UNP to consolidate its power after its landslide victory in 1977, in which all active parliamentary opposition was effectively ended. Thus, in 1978 the UNP found it easy to write a new constitution, changing the previous British-style parliamentary system into a presidential system, based on the Gaullist model, with proportional representation, which gave the president broad executive powers and immunity from legal prosecution in both his private and official capacities throughout his tenure. Then, in 1979 the government passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the essence of which conferred on the president the power to detain suspects indefinitely, without formal charges or court proceedings and without access to legal or family assistance. In 1982 the Third Amendment to the Constitution was passed, which called for a special "presidential election," President Jayewardene being reelected to a second six-year term, before his first had ended, by a mere 52.9 majority of the polled votes. Finally, later in 1982 the next step came in the form of the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, which mandated a referendum to ratify by a simple majority the president's proposal to delay the holding of parliamentary elections, and instead to prolong by six more years the life of the present parliament, as well as to give the president increased control over it. This referendum too passed by a slight majority: 54%. Tambiah alleges, providing no hard evidence, that both votes in 1982 were marred by intimidation and fraud, making the slim majorities even more significant. "All this," Tambiah writes, "smacks of an unbridled 'oriental despotism, and an absolutist regime. . ." (p. 41).

But despite the attempt of the UNP to monopolize power, Tambiah points out that in 1983 it was hardly a *united* political body, being riddled by rival factions that were competing for power. He names three such groups: (1) those immediately in charge of national security, with close ties to the military; (2) those controlling the UNP party machine, including Cyril Mathew, Industries Minister, leader of the UNP "trade union," the Jatika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS), and "militant Buddhist zealot"; and (3) those closely allied with the prime minister and minister for housing, Rana-singhe Premadasa.

Tambiah fails, however, to explain how this factionalization within the UNP itself either directly or indirectly affects the ethnic conflict, which is what he set out to do, instead focusing again on Cyril Mathew as the main villain in the show, "a notorious and archetypal example of a politician-boss, one who has at hand retinues and followers and who... has helped to regularize violence as a regular feature of Sri Lanka politics today" (pp. 18-19). He then explains how the "rise of extreme personages such as Cyril Mathew and his minions" (p. 52) must be viewed in the context of expanding networks of patronage, brokerage, and organized violence that connect local politicians, local police, and Members of Parliament to *muddehalis*, local-level entrepreneurs, who are able to mobilize mobs of thugs during elections to terrorize adversaries. Tambiah contends that the UNP controlled trade union, the JSS, under the firm control of Mathew, had become by 1983 the supreme thuggery machine in the land and that it was from this organization that the gangs which ran amok in Colombo in July of 1983 was primarily drawn.

The third causal factor Tambiah identifies as immediately leading to the 1983 riots is "an increasing populism and chauvinism among the urban masses at large, who were attracted to a 'millenarian politicized Buddhism, and a dangerously simplified 'racism' that both defined for them an explosive nationalist identity and provided a heady stimulant for aggressive action against the 'enemies' of the Sinhalese" (p. 34). It is here that Tambiah poses the crucial question of why the "enemies" had to be Tamils; why, in other words, the violence that can be understood in terms of the first two causal factors was expressed not in the form of *class* conflict, which these two factors could have led us to expect, but of *ethnic* conflict. And it is here that his argument becomes less than wholly adequate. For he begins by stating -- and rightly so -- that while the particular manifestation of this chauvinistic violence was induced by recent economic and political circumstances, it can be fully comprehended only in the context of a much longer process that began in the nineteenth century, during the British colonial period. But instead of immediately exploring this long-term process, he puts it aside until the next chapter, instead turning to another manifestation of this Sinhalese chauvinism -- namely, the cooptation of the originally Hindu deity, Kataragama (Skanda), as the "preeminent guardian god of the Sinhalese" (p. 59). While Tambiah succinctly points to the irony inherent in this transformation -- viz., in turning the worship of Kataragama into an ecstatic movement that is a major springboard for Sinhalese ethnic chauvinism, the devotees have created just the type of South Indian cult that they thought they were turning away from in removing all Tamil Hindu elements, as well as worshipers -- and although he justifiably, and rather poignantly, decries this increasing homogenization of what was once a beautifully heterogeneous practice, he fails to integrate this phenomenon into his explanatory framework, to explain exactly how this particular manifestation of Sinhalese chauvinism is related to the spiraling ethnic conflict, particularly the 1983 Colombo violence. This is not to say that this presentation of the "Sinhalization of Kataragama" does not belong in the book at all; it simply does not belong where Tambiah has put it -- namely, in the chapter on underlying causal factors leading immediately to the 1983 riots.

After this perplexing interlude, Tambiah returns to the task at hand: an analysis of the historical antecedents to the current ethnic strife. He believes that the most relevant entry point for appraising these antecedents lies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of the British colonial era, when the two indigenous ethnic communities, previously separate, were brought together under the umbrella of Imperial rule. The British imposed a single administration, educated an English-speaking elite drawn from Sinhalese and Tamils alike, opened up plantations and imported a new population of South Indian Tamil laborers to work them, and up to a point created a *single polity* and a *plural society* p. 65; [emphases added].

This was the period in which began the recurrent allegation by the Sinhalese that the Tamil minority held a disproportionate and unfair advantage in education, as well as in white-collar and professional employment both in the public and private sectors. That is, because the arid, isolated north held no opportunities, neither agricultural nor commercial, for the indigenous Tamil youth, their main path to a more secure and gainful future lay in higher education in one of the universities to the south and in subsequent employment in government or private occupations in Colombo, and although Tambiah does not mention it, because the New England Protestant missionary activity, which was restricted primarily to the Jaffna peninsula, had given them a good dose of the work ethic, which drove them toward self-improvement, they took full advantage of the educational and occupational opportunities afforded to them further south by the British colonial regime. And by so doing, they brought upon them the wrath of an envious and indignant Sinhalese majority, who believed, and continued thenceforth to believe -- wrongly, avers Tambiah -- that they were given an *unfair* advantage and held actually a *majority* of administrative positions. What right did a minority have to usurp what should rightfully belong to the majority?

This period also saw the importation of thousands of South Indian Tamil "coolie" laborers by the British to work on their newly established tea plantations -- an occupation that the self-reliant Sinhalese peasants understandably found distasteful. Isolated from both the lowland Sinhalese and the north and east coast Tamils, these highland Tamil plantation workers formed a distinct sociocultural pocket that persists to this day. Tambiah decries the fact that this population, which has been present in the country for over 100 years and which has made an invaluable contribution to the national economy, had been denied the rights of citizenship and enfranchisement by the Sinhalese-dominated central government, which feared their electoral power in the midst of the Kandyan, traditionally Sinhalese, region. But while this discrimination was true for the first 15 years or so of the country's independence, Tambiah ignores the fact that beginning in the mid-1960s, under the repatriation pact with India, those "estate Tamils" who chose to remain in the country began to be given citizenship and voting rights -- a process that continued, in an admittedly piecemeal fashion, until January of 1986, when the relatively few remaining estate workers who were either undeclared or had earlier decided for repatriation to India but had reneged, were granted these rights. He also fails to mention that since 1977, the estate workers have had able and tireless spokesman for their cause *within* the UNP-dominated central government in the form of Mr. S. Thondaman, Minister of Rural Industrial Development, leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), and himself of estate-Tamil parentage.

Even more significant, however, is Tambiah's rare expression of objectivity in pointing out that the indigeneous Tamils have always thought as little of their estate brethren as have the Sinhalese, owing mainly to the workers' generally lower caste and tribal affiliations, and have thus for the most part excluded them from their political plans.

But whatever its ethnic divisions, this Anglo-educated and - orientated elite (comprising also mainly low-country Sinhalese) was, in the years from 1880 to 1920, largely united in the common goal of gaining for itself an increased legislative and administrative representation. By the 1930s, however, this unity of Sinhalese and Tamils was showing signs of disintegrating, mainly in the face of the political implications of the Donoughmore Constitution, which based representation in the Legislative Council on territorial and demographic criteria, thereby giving a distinct advantage to the majority Sinhalese over the various minority populations, from whom the loudest protest came the Sri Lankan Tamils. Another blow was dealt to Tamil national political participation by the Soulbury Constitution on the eve of independence, which confirmed the electoral principle of representation based on territorial and demographic criteria and rejected Tamil pleas for special representation. Thus, in 1948 the British transferred power to an English-educated but Sinhalese-dominated elite led by D.S. Senanayake, who collectively formed the United National Party. This party, under different leaders, ruled the country until 1956. But as Tambiah aptly points out, this early domination by an Anglophile Sinhalese elite, ruling on the basis of universal franchise, territorial and demographic representation, and majority politics, not only discriminated against Tamil participation in the national political process, it eroded traditional bases of power and leadership and excluded the largely rural, relatively uneducated masses as well. This cleavage within the Sinhalese society was later to have significant repercussions on the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic conflict.

Along with this transfer of power to an English-educated, Sinhalese-dominated elite, Tambiah analyses another longer-standing trend that had an even more extreme impact on Sinhalese-Tamil relations. This trend was two pronged: the first comprised the emergence and consolidation during the first half of the century a traditionally and rural-oriented, Sinhalese -educated elite that had been spurned by the Western and urban-oriented, English-educated ruling elite: the second consisted of a Buddhist revivalist movement that had begun in the 1850s and that had been gaining in both propagandistic momentum and organizational strength ever since, spurred on by such Buddhist theosophists as Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky and such local leaders as Anagarika Dharmapala. Tambiah puts it thus:

Overall, the most critical development in the Buddhist resurgence was a closing of the ranks, a growing solidarity, and the engagement in a propagandistic activism with political overtones on the part of the Buddhist monks, who since they too had village origins, were natural allies of the new rural elite. In preaching the restoration of Buddhism to its rightful historical place, they were also advocating their own return to prominence in the life of the society and the state (p.69).

The immediate result of the coalescence of these two processes was a "multi-faceted 'nationalism' (Ibid.) that brought the majority of the Sinhalese into its ranks, and, at the same time, *excluded* and *alienated* minority groups that spoke a language other than Sinhalese and practiced a religion other than Buddhism. This new nationalism conflated three elements: "The Sinhalese language, the Buddhist religion, and the Sinhalese 'people' as an 'Aryan race.' To be truly Sinhalese was to be born Sinhalese, speak Sinhalese, and practice the Sinhalese religion, Buddhism" (Ibid.). And among the various minority populations, the Tamils experienced this exclusion to the greatest extent, on the basis of all three elements: language, religion, and the claim to "Aryan" origin, the latter they rejected, rightly, as spurious. But, strangely enough, Tambiah seems to miss the main point here. If all the adherents wanted these three elements to establish was *Sinhalese* identity, it is doubtful that the Tamils would have found this movement so objectionable, except for the claim to "Aryan" superiority; no, what the Tamils resented-- and, after all, this was a *nationalist* movement -- was the fact that the Sinhalese zealots claimed that to be *Sri Lankan* one must speak Sinhala, adhere to Buddhism, and belong to the "Aryan" Sinhalese race, that is, *be* Sinhalese, and *not* Tamil. In other words, what the Tamils protested was being left out of the national equation. They had no reason to want to become Sinhalese, who only naturally spoke Sinhala and were Buddhists; what they wanted was to be considered *Sri Lankan*. Otherwise, why all the fuss, on the part of the Tamil people of the time, as well their present-day champion, S.J. Tambiah?

At any rate, Tambiah is certainly correct in arguing that this rising tide of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism and rural populism swept S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to power, in a crushing defeat on the UNP, in 1956. Bandaranaike not only espoused, and was elected on the basis of, a militant revival of Buddhism and an exclusively Sinhalese ethnic nationalism, but he, against his better judgement, also used his leadership to pass the Sinhala Only Bill in his election year, which sparked both loud but peaceful Tamil protests and the Sinhalese violent response to those protests, in the form of the 1956 and 1958 riots.

Tambiah emphasizes that the Tamil protests to the discriminatory legislation of 1956 was entirely non-violent, taking the form mainly of *satyagraha* campaigns, while the Sinhalese reaction was of the opposite nature. He also points to the period 1956-58 as offering the best opportunity to settle the Tamil question once and for all, which regrettably was lost in the face of chauvinistic Sinhalese politics. The Tamil Federal Party had begun its demand for an "autonomous Tamil legislative state within a Federal Union of Ceylon" (p. 73). In the last days of July, 1956, Bandaranaike, the prime minister, and Chelvanayagam, the leader of the Federal Party, had reached a promising compromise agreement whereby Tamil would be recognized as a "language of Ceylon" and would be the language of administration in Tamil areas in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, but with the interests of the Sinhala-speaking population there being fully protected. Moreover, there was to be devolution of authority away from the central government to elected district councils. This proposed legislation aroused such vociferous protest from Buddhist monks in the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna (EBR), their lay followers, and a Kandyan political activist group, the Tri Sinhala Peramuna,

the latter rejecting the compromise as a "complete and abject surrender." (Ibid.) that it was withdrawn and replaced with the Sinhala Only Bill. Significantly, and ironically, the UNP, then in opposition, sensing the direction of the political winds, jumped on the bandwagon and began agitating against the compromise agreement as making what it termed unacceptable concessions to the Tamils. Its leader at the time was none other than J.R. Jayawardene, the present-day president and champion of devolution. It bears mentioning here that in the true, and inimical, spirit of extreme partisan politics, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the widow of S.W.R.D. and current *de facto* leader of the SLFP opposition, now leads the attack on president Jayawardene's plan for devolution, essentially the same plan that her husband once advocated.

The Tamils in the north responded to the abrogation of the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam pact by defacing National Transport buses that were marked in Sinhala and began laying plans for another *satyagraha* campaign. The Sinhalese zealots, in turn, launched the riots of 1958, and the situation has grown progressively worse ever since.

Tambiah succinctly summarizes this lost opportunity and its effects on the current crisis thus:

In the fateful years of 1983-84 when the Sri Lankan ethnic turmoil seemed hopelessly entangled and almost beyond repair, one cannot but look back on the years 1959-57 as not only a time of promise of a social revolution for the Sinhalese but also a time when a more stiff-backed statesmanship on the part of Bandaranaike might have settled the Tamil question in large part. The aborted promises instead exposed the lack of generosity among the Sinhalese chauvinists ...and gave notice of the Sinhalese intransigence towards the Tamils that would progressively drive the latter to a politics of despair p. 72].

Why was language such a volatile issue in 1956 to begin with? Prior to 1959 English was the official government and legal language and medium of instruction in all government schools, including the universities -- a carryover of the British colonial practice by the English-educated elite of the UNP. But while this "English only" policy put urban members of all the ethnic groups, who had access to the best English education, on more or less equal footing, regardless of their particular ethnicity, it was clearly discriminatory against the rural Sinhalese masses, who lived in areas where English instruction was either lacking in quality or altogether absent. Thus, for the first eight years of the country's independence, the most important political, legal, economic, and educational institutions were controlled by a mere 10% of the population, with the remainder of the population justifiably feeling "left out". Hence, all considerations of justice, fair play, and efficiency called for the substitution of the two indigenous languages (*swabasha*), Sinhalese and Tamil, for English in education and in legal and administrative areas. But while the initial plan called for equal status of Sinhala and Tamil as dual national languages and as mediums of instruction in education, the rising tide of Sinhalese nationalism swept aside Tamil and firmly established Sinhala as the sole official language of the country, although it left the dual languages as mediums of instruction intact. The result, of course, was that the Sinhalese and Tamil

students who had theretofore sat together in the same classrooms were now separated into two streams, even into different schools, with only the Sinhala medium students having any hope of gainful white-collar or professional employment after graduation. A Tamil-medium education, then, led to a dead-end, which, of course, the Tamils were simply not accustomed to.

It is thus no surprise that the Tamil population felt cheated, disgruntled, and angry at the passage of the Sinhala Only Bill in 1956. They literally had had their sole avenue to a secure and prestigious existence firmly blocked. But this begs the question of why the Sinhalese were so lacking in generosity as to take this rather extreme step. Tambiah refers to the irrationally chauvinistic Sinhalese nationalism as the main answer. While this argument is certainly valid, it is so only up to a point. In other words, was there a *rational* basis for the Sinhala only "correction?" Did the Tamils actually enjoy an unfair advantage and a disproportionate representation in higher education and in white-collar employment prior to 1956? Apparently, Tambiah thinks not, but all he does is to refer to this belief as part of "Sinhalese mythology" and to dismiss it as just another aspect of their ethnic chauvinism, without producing any evidence for his position. The only education and employment figures he adduces to support his argument that the claim of Tamil over-representation is false are taken from the 1981 census, by which time the Sinhala Only Bill had had plenty of time to produce its "correction." In other words, while the current data certainly belie any continuing notion that the Tamils enjoy an unfair advantage and thus render wholly irrational any contemporary motivation for violence based on this claim, they say nothing about the state of affairs in the 1940s and early 50s and hence nothing about the *original* motivation for the "Sinhala only" sentiment. It seems that Tambiah has chosen to present data that only support his contention and to ignore those that tend to refute it -- and, most tellingly, those that are most relevant to the context of the Sinhala Only Bill, namely, those pertaining to education and employment patterns of the late 1940s and early 50s. These data, presented by Samarasinghe (1984), show how that the disproportionate representation of the Tamils in higher education and white-collar employment was not a myth spun by the Sinhalese chauvinists to rationalize the Sinhala Only Bill, but was actually a valid assessment of the situation: the Tamils prior to the Sinhala only legislation did actually enjoy representation in university education and white collar government employment far beyond their percentage in the overall population. Is it any wonder, then, that the Sinhalese majority viewed with resentment and rancor this over-privileged position of the Tamil minority? It is readily admitted that the Sinhala Only Bill went too far in rectifying the situation by completely depriving access to privileged government occupations to those people who previously had gained them solely through personal effort and merit and reserving them exclusively for others largely on the basis of their ethnic identity, as it is that the Tamil protest to this legislation was largely justified. But to argue that the Sinhalese claim of Tamil over-representation has no basis in reality whatsoever is also going too far. A more accurate assessment of the situation would be that the Sinhalese chauvinists wrongly viewed simple Tamil achievement as intentional deprivation of their people, and thus sought to remedy the problem by "returning the favor" to the Tamils. What began as a rational attempt to establish at least parity in higher education and government

white-collar employment, to give the Sinhalese a "push" to help them at least catch up with the more advantaged Tamils and perhaps even to surpass them, more in keeping with their majority population status, was swept up in the irrationality of a nationalist movement, in which Tamils became the scapegoats for Sinhalese social ills and the remedy became total exclusion of the Tamil "enemy" from higher public employment.

If that in fact was the goal of the Sinhala only proponents, it has certainly been achieved, as the 1981 census figures clearly show. But the dual language education process had also created an atmosphere of misunderstanding, fear, and distrust among the youth of the country, and the "affirmative action" for the majority paractices of the Sinhalese-dominated central government have alienated the Tamil people from the mainstream of Sri Lankan society and driven them to support the Tamil United Liberation Front's (TULF's) demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the country. But the most significant aspect of this growing rift has been the alienation and despair of the Tamil youth, for it has been this age-group that has suffered most from the Sinhalese discriminatory practices in education and employment and that has increasingly turned to violent means of achieving equity through total secession.

But of even greater consternation to the Sinhalese has been the fact that the Tamil militant groups have increasingly sought support for their struggle from political parties and politicians in Tamil Nātu. Not only have the latter taken up the cause of their militant Sri Lankan brethren, but the militants have been afforded a safe haven in South India and have reportedly established their guerilla training camps and receive most of their arms and other military equipment there as well. This attempted linkage with Tamil Nātu on the part of the militants has enraged the Sinhalese, raising in their minds the specter of South Indian "invasions" -- a specter made palatably real by the historical "precedent" of such invasions in centuries gone by. Tambiah argues, quite rightly, that the "last straw" for the Sinhalese has been the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE's) use of the ancient South Indian Cola Kingdom's tiger symbol and their and the other militant groups' increasing attacks on national security forces and police, in so far as it was the memorial service in Colombo for the 13 Sinhalese soldiers that had been ambushed by Tamil guerrillas that immediately sparked the violence there in July, 1983.

Having established why the general enmity present among the Sinhalese urban poor was focused specifically on Tamils in the summer of 1983, Tambiah next turns to an even longer standing history, or, more appropriately, *mythohistory*, of the island to complete his explanation for the "militant Sinhala Buddhist ideology," which contemporarily fuels itself by aggressively mobilizing against the Tamils as the ethnic enemy. What are the oldest roots of this Sinhalese-Buddhist militancy?

First of all, Tambiah sets out to dispel any notion of "We were here first" -- regardless of whether a Sinhalese or Tamil is making this claim -- by arguing that long before either Buddhism was introduced or distinctive Tamil settlements were established in the north, there existed an "autochthonous people . . . which] included not merely the hunting-and-gathering Vāddas, but also people who practiced pastoralism and settled agriculture" (P. 88). Although the popular belief, propagated by the *Mahāvamsa*, is that settled agriculture was brought by the North Indian Vijaya and his band of followers, who thus colonized a kind of cultural vacuum, and despite the historical and archaeological "Buddhist time barrier," which equates the beginning of Sri Lankan history with the advent of Buddhism, in the third century B.C., and tries to focus excavation and restoration solely on obviously Buddhist sites, Tambiah asserts that other, "heterodox" archaeological research has uncovered an unbroken record of man's presence on the island beginning several thousands of years B.C. in the Late Stone Age, extending through Neolithic times, when pastoralism and settled agriculture had begun, to the Iron Age, which in both India and Sri Lanka most likely began around 1,000 B.C. It is to the Neolithic cultures of the Iron Age in Sri Lanka and South India that the richest archaeological evidence pertains, particularly to the complexes of burials known as megaliths. What do these prehistorical data show? In the words of Tambiah, the numerous megalithic sites in Sri Lanka "have an unmistakable affinity with the Iron Age megalithic culture of South India, and that before the advent of 'Mauryan traditions' of the coming of Buddhism in the third century B.C., the local inhabitants cultivated rice through tank irrigation, and were culturally closest to the early Iron Age "megalithic" man of middle and South India" (p. 90). And what are the implications of these findings for the Sinhalese or Tamil claim that "We were here first?" Again quoting Tambiah:

The point of these archaeological findings . . . is not whether Tamils (or Dravidians) or Sinhalese (or North Indians) came first and colonized the island, but that there is an early historical context which, if properly understood, should establish from prehistoric times commonalities among the "dry-zone" settlements of Sri Lanka and of South India, which advanced in the direction of hydraulic technology settled rice agriculture combined with shifting agriculture, and in time cumulatively provided the basis for those multicentric "kingdoms" that developed interesting legitimating ideologies and cultural practices uniting kingship, polity, and religious specialists (p. 91).

This argument is a strange departure from Tambiah's heretofore "Tamilcentric" point of view, for he carefully avoids the question of exactly who these early, prehistoric people were, as well as exactly what accounts for the uniformity of megalithic culture in South India and Sri Lanka in the first place. It seems obvious, from the data he himself presents, that the people were South Indian and that the homogeneity of Iron Age culture was based primarily on diffusion of ideas and material items from South India to Sri Lanka and secondarily on independent invention and diffusion in the opposite direction. So this basic megalithic, hydraulic civilization that developed *in situ* from an earlier Late Stone Age culture and onto which the ancestors of both

the present-day Sinhalese and Tamils subsequently superimposed their particular socio-cultural patterns was essentially South Indian, and thus at least "proto-Tamil," in orientation. Why Tambiah decided suddenly, to take a more cautious and conservative approach concerning the prehistory of the island, unless he simply decided not to counter the Sinhalese claim of migration primacy with a similar Tamil claim, is known only to him. But bias in any direction is equally damaging to an argument, and unwarranted "neutrality" is itself a type of bias.

Tambiah next turns to the historical development of the chauvinistic Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, and here his argument begins to be more soberly objective. He first claims that the Sinhalese are a "majority with a minority complex," which results from a combination of two factors: first, the relatively minuscule size of the island, both in terms of territory and population; and second, the nature of the political relations with South India in early history "that have been interpreted in certain (tendentious) ways and inscribed in the traditional chronicles and transmitted as the true past" (pp. 92-93). The latter point refers to his thesis that the essence of these Buddhist chronicles, including the *Dipavamsa*, *Mahavamsa*, *Atthakathas*, and *Tipitaka*, not only mythically "conflated the unity of the Buddhist religion, the entirety of the island of Lanka, and the totality of the Sinhala people" (p.93) but was also born out of a deep-seated fear that the Buddhist politico-religious institutions of the island might at any time be swept aside by invading hordes of South Indian Tamils and replaced with Hindu institutions. Both Sri Lankan Buddhism and nationalism, then, originated and developed out of a process of *opposition* with Tamil-Hindu South India. But as any paranoia has its basis in reality, so too has the Sinhalese-Buddhist anxiety concerning South India, for in fact there has been periodic harassment, ranging from small-scale raids to full-scale invasions, of Sri Lanka by various Tamil kingdoms from the earliest historical period and culminating in the tumultuous tenth to thirteenth centuries, when the South Indian Cola Empire mounted successful incursions. But Tambiah's main point here, regardless of this fear's founding in historical reality, is that once established, it became available ever after as grist for the Sinhalese political mill:

Here then we have the transmission over time of an *ideology* that was enshrined and objectified as a historical memory in the monkish chronicles, and which periodically, from the first centuries A.D. right up to our own time was available for invocation, resurrection' and manipulation by zealots and political activists of different centuries, caught in differing circumstances, and following objectives relevant to their times p. 94; emphasis in original].

But standing in considerable opposition to this Sinhalese-Buddhist ideology is another, equally, if not more, valid aspect of Sri Lankan history -- namely, the process of the "enlargement and enrichment" of the Sinhalese by periodic infusions of Tamil migrants, whether as mercenary soldiers, scribes, artisans and craftsmen, religious specialists, or royal marriage partners for Sinhalese rulers, from the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva civilizations, through the Kotte period, and to the end of the Kandyan Kingdom. With respect to the latter period, Tambiah makes a telling point when he

writes, "In these days of uninformed slogan-mongering, it may be salutary to remind the zealots on *both* sides that the treaty of 1815 signed by the Kandyan chiefs with their British victors contains some signatures in Sinhala script, some in Tamil script, and others in a mixture of the two" (p. 98). Too there admixtures of Tamils into the larger Sinhalese population in the coastal region north of Colombo, as there was a peaceful, symbiotic exchange of culture, as well as marriage partners, between contiguous but separate Sinhalese and Tamil settlements in the interior of the east coast. Tambiah suggests, then, that the historical Sinhalese concept of the Tamil as "foe" is largely the product of ethnocentric Buddhist myth, which over-exaggerates the periodic points of conflict between the two peoples, which concept of the Tamil as "friend" is more befitting the preponderance of historical reality.

Be that as it may, however, whatever harmonious relations did exist between the two ethnic groups began to unravel in 1956: "...such traditional patterns of peaceful interaction between Sinhalese and Tamils, and the organic transformation of Tamil people into Sinhalese, suffered a drastic re-sorting and dichotomization in the pressure chamber of post-1956 politics" (P. 100). Tambiah succinctly summarizes the impact of Sinhalese-Buddhist mythohistorical ideology on the current interethnic conflict as follows:

In sum, the continuing transmission of the *Mahavamsa* ideology in the context of a melting pot of diverse peoples of South Indian origin becoming Sinhalese has in good measure motivated the 'overdetermined' attitude of hostility toward rejection of the Tamils...In a curious and interesting sense, the contemporary consciousness of ethnicity is a politicized product of post-independence "democratic" politics, chauvinist rhetoric, and state-building. Its present transformed and explosive manifestation has risen on a base that has contained older ingredients, and experienced prior bakings. Deeply ignorant of their past, the young adults and youth of today, on both the Tamil and Sinhalese sides, educated in two different linguistic streams and exposed for over two decades to notions that Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil-Hindu identities are mutually exclusive, have come to think and feel as two separate peoples, two ethnic species, locked in a man-made battle for survival (pp. 101-102).

Tambiah next turns to the Tamil side of the story, mainly to the historical bases for their grievances. Here he uses a comparative framework, presenting both similarities and differences with Sinhalese history, and here he continues his newly discovered objectivity. First, he avers that the Tamils have experienced the same patterns of incorporation of succeeding waves of migrants from South India, resulting in much the same regional and sociocultural diversity within the Tamil population as among the Sinhalese. Deserving special attention here is his claim that historically the Tamils of the Eastern Province had little to do either politically or socially with the Jaffna Kingdom, which flourished in the centuries prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, and that this lack of sociopolitical interdependence heightened after the kingdom of Jaffna was subjugated, first by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch.

This historical fact of course has particular relevance to the current cry by the Tamil militants for Eelam -- a unified Tamil "state" comprising both the Northern and Eastern Provinces. And the relevance of this point is underscored by the fact that it has been made by a "Tamilphilic" (and "Sinhala-phobic") author.

Tambiah also points out the areas of formal similarity between the Jaffna kingdom on the one hand and the kingdoms of Kotte and Kandy on the other, particularly with respect to their economic bases, political structures, caste constellations, and religious cults. But he pays most attention to yet another resemblance -- "little appreciated, especially by the Sinhalese chauvinists" (p. 104) -- that makes the Sri Lankan Tamil "predicament" similar to that of the Sinhalese. It is difficult to determine exactly what this "predicament" is -- this is one of the few sections in the book in which the writing is less than perfectly lucid -- but at least the *implication* is that it refers to the fact that both groups, at least in the minds of their respective members, "have nowhere else to go". But while even the most ardent Tamil extremist would have to concede this fact as it pertains to the Sinhalese, his Sinhalese counterpart would most likely not return him the favor, for it is commonly claimed by Sinhalese, and not just by ethnic chauvinists, that while their people have nowhere else to go the Tamils at least have a homeland to which to return in South India. The Tamils, however, at least according to Tambiah, consider Sri Lanka to be their homeland to the same extent as do the Sinhalese. The Sinhalese are at best dubious of this claim, for two reasons: First, and most immediately, as was pointed out earlier, the militants have been maintaining for a number of years training camps and bases of operation in Tamil Nadu, TULF politicians are living in exile in Madras, and tens of thousands of Tamil refugees have fled there in order to escape the escalating violence in the Northern Province. Second, the Sri Lankan Tamils have always appeared "clannish" and arrogantly isolated to the Sinhalese, making it easier for the latter to maintain their belief that the former are socially and culturally closer to South India than to Sri Lanka. While conceding this second point, Tambiah nevertheless attempts to argue that this appearance of isolation is based not on a desire to be exclusive or to resist assimilation into the larger Sri Lankan society, but simply on a combination of sociocultural and geographic factors inherent to the Sri Lankan Tamil population and region: namely, while the southern Sinhalese population had a pattern of caste relations similar to those in the Jaffna area, the latter were more rigidly circumscribed by stricter norms of purity and pollution, of food taboos (e.g., beef) and prescriptions (e.g., vegetables); the north had larger numbers of members of degraded low castes (outcastes), such as the Parayar, Pallar, and Nalavar, than did the south; Tamil women of upper-caste affiliation were more rigidly bound by severe rules of premarital sexual prohibitions, were more confined to the home, and had less freedom of physical movement and of extra-familial social interaction than did their Sinhalese counterparts; the north was an isolated area of the island, separated from the commercial and plantation areas to the south by an arid, unproductive zone; and the Tamil Vellala caste dominates, in both numerical and political terms, thereby increasing their social solidarity, in the north to a much greater extent than it does in any other area of the country, while the lower castes tend to be more politically successful in the Sinhalese coastal regions. Tambiah cannot resist taking one more swipe at Cyril Mathew here, stating that he, "a product of such low-caste mobilization, is a dubious example of 'social emancipation' and overdone Sinhala Buddhist identity" (p. 106).

Tambiah's main point in enumerating these differences is to argue that;

If all these features I have listed made the northern Tamils a privileged and strong-knit "protectionist" minority in Sinhalese eyes, they also made the Jaffna Tamils a proud community whose experience of social dominance in their own region and whose sense of greater "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy" in matters of caste and religious observances made it impossible for them to accept a position of subordination in a polity composed of a Sinhalese majority, who by their standards were inferior in their purity of customs, inferior in talent, and had no historical claim to rule or encompass them (Ibid.).

Tambiah next points out that the frugality of Tamil students in Colombo, who were obligated to send home money to their families in the north, as well the Tamil white-collar urban ghetto residence, has formed the Sinhalese stereotype of Tamils as "ambitious, exclusive accumulators of money" (Ibid.). And envy has a lot to do with this stereotype, because there are no Tamil slums in Colombo even to compare with the Sinhalese ones.

But, despite these differences, there is one countervailing factor to be observed - namely, just as the Sinhalese had their religious revivalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century led by Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), so did the Tamils have a similar, but even earlier, movement led by Arumugam Navalar (1822-79), a Saivite of the Vellala caste. Navalar's aim, as was Dharmapala's with the Sinhalese later, was to rid his Tamil population of the effects of Christian missionary activity and the overall process of Westernization and to purify the sullied Hindu religious beliefs and practices, but, at the same time, to borrow the proselytizing and educational methods of the Christian missions and apply them to Tamil schools. There was, however, a difference between these two movements. While they were both reactions against increasing Westernization, and were thus homologous in their overall *forms*, their *contents* differed in terms of the specific religious and sociocultural value and behavioral norms that they were advocating. In the words of Tambiah, this Tamil revivalist movement, championed by Navalar, "...represented a heightened cultural and linguistic consciousness that naturally emphasized the distinctiveness of the vocal Tamil revivalists from the Buddhist activist movements in the south, and this sense of difference also affected the political question of majority-minority relations" (p.108).

This question emerged during the Donoughmore Commission hearings in the form of "counterproductive misunderstandings that directly fed into the cesspit of future ethnic conflict" (Ibid.). That is, the Sinhalese politicians at the time believed that the Tamil pleading for special minority group protection and privileges "was a case of self-interested obstruction of progress and of a march toward self-government" (p. 109); hence these pleadings were largely ignored and the march toward a future of increasing ethnic turmoil was begun.

Where will this turmoil end? Tambiah makes two, equally ominous predictions: First, "if the Tamils of Sri Lanka . . . make common cause with Tamil Nātu, that would be the final chapter, indeed a final consequence, of a train of events, rather than its antecedent and initiating cause. Then indeed the Sinhalese will surely witness the birth of their self-fulfilling prophecy that South India threatens to engulf them" (p. 110). Second, "an [sic] in desperate fear they may attempt to perpetrate their final solution -- the genocide or expulsion of all Tamils from Sri Lanka" (Ibid). But Tambiah, continuing in his newly found objectivity, goes on to implicate the Tamils themselves in this second possible outcome. The Tamils he has in mind here are those living abroad, primarily in the United States, Britain, and Australia, who deeply resent the Sri Lankan government's handling of the situation and who thus give "financial and moral support to the violent guerilla activities of the rebels" (p. 112). In a scathing condemnation of this foreign support, Tambiah writes:

This expression of vicarious revenge is self-defeating, and it might in the long run be suicidal. For it too in time might realize its self-fulfilling prophecy of genocide: It is likely to result in the massive annihilation of the Tamil citizens and the razing to the ground of their villages and towns of birth. Thus the fate that was anticipated will have been made to happen by the *victims themselves* [Ibid.; emphasis added].

These two extreme outcomes, then, "are the 'black holes' that await us, and before they can suck us all in, a negotiated political settlement *must* take place" (p. 110; emphasis in original).

But before he examines just what such a settlement must entail, he places before us another unexpected interlude, this time a digression, a recapitulation of the current (circa 1984) ethnic conflict, in which he reexamines his earlier, diffusely presented points and brings them into much sharper, as well as more objective, focus. This he does under the guise of claiming to examine the Sri Lankan case in the *context* of political violence worldwide: "to suggesting indirectly how it [the Sri Lankan situation] may be capable, as a case study, of illuminating a world larger than itself, and revealing more general truths regarding political processes in many other parts of the globe" (p. 115). "Guise" seems appropriate, because he never really follows up on this claim, not even "indirectly," leaving it up to the reader to draw his or her own inferences. Instead he simply goes over old material in a brighter and more objective -- and thus refreshing--light. For example, in summarizing the kinds of political violence occurring in Sri Lanka today, he writes:

There is the violence *in potentia* widespread among certain segments of the Sinhalese population, which is tapped, triggered, and intensified by political patrons, bosses, politicians, and business *mudalalis*, who use it to further their populist causes. The government in power, the UNP, is not a stranger to this use of organized force, just as its predecessor, the SLFP, was not [p. 116].

Then, "there is the deadly terrorism and intimidation practiced by the armed forces. Thus we have violence committed by a majority, which includes, beside that perpetrated by private gangs, the repressive use of the country's armed forces and the police force. . . (Ibid). The reader should be quite familiar with both these themes by now. But then Tambiah also includes "the desperate, armed resistance and guerilla action of increasing numbers of Tamil youth in the north, whose 'righteous cause' as freedom fighters, as they see it, does not erase the fact that they are engaged in terrorism" (Ibid.; emphasis added). Thus, in his newly discovered ability to see *both* sides of the issue, what before had been his equivocal position on terrorism -- "While one cannot condone the terrorist activities of the rebels, one must realize that these are acts of desperation and hopelessness" (p. 78). -- is now a clear condemnation of terrorism, as it is practiced by the Sinhalese armed forces *and* the Tamil militants.

"A black hole threatens to engulf both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities" (p. 122), begins Tambiah in his chapter, "What is to be Done?," repeating the ominous metaphor he used in the previous chapter. While this metaphor may seem excessive, it also seems apt, although it more likely refers to neither of the extreme outcomes of an invasion of South Indians *or* to the genocide or total expulsion of the Sri Lanka Tamils, but to a protracted, endless "war of attrition," with the cost in money, property, and lives on both sides perpetually mounting -- a black hole more gradually engulfing than the other two but just as black. What, indeed, *is* to be done to avoid this. or the other two, unwanted paths?

Tambiah begins with a note of caution: "People on both sides will have to work toward a sane solution compounded of restraint, empathy, and generosity. It is inevitable that any agreement that is reached will in the short run completely satisfy no one, and be repugnant to the extremists on both sides on the grounds that too much has been given away and too little gained" (Ibid.). In light of the recent (July, 1987)peace proposals jointly offered by the governments of Sri Lanka and India, which, in fact, have aroused considerable opposition from "extremists on both sides, " these words of Tambiah indeed seem prophetic -- not perspicaciously so, perhaps, but still prophetic.

He then proceeds to outline the "contours of a possible solution" (Ibid.), and this solution seems to be just the "sane" type that he has advocated-- implacably so. And the sanity of his solution lies in the fact that it requires concessions on *both* sides of the conflict. On the side of the Sinhalese, it essentially requires that the government, on the national level, recognize that citizenship should not be defined, nor should law be applied, on the basis of religion or ethnicity; and, on the regional level, devolve legal and administrative powers to district or provincial councils, whose members should be elected on a proportional basis from the ethnic composition of the area's population. This would mean, of course, that the Tamils would "rule" the councils of the areas in which they predominate and imply "the larger grouping of Tamil districts for the purpose of following certain larger collective goals" (p. 125). Whether or not Tambiah means by this concept of "larger grouping" a united Northern and Eastern Province he does not explicitly state, but, of course, this unification of the two provinces has proven to be the crucial concession on the part of the government in its recent peace proposals.

On the part of the Tamils, the extremists "must renounce not only 'terrorist activities -- for they are plainly suicidal in consequence -- but also 'separatism, that is , the concept of an independent state of Eelam (p. 123), which, according to Tambiah, is inviable both economically and territorially, the area in question being poor in resources and containing significant numbers of Muslims and Sinhalese, as well as Tamils, who do not support unification with the north. This latter point would seem to refute even the granting of limited autonomy to a district council that comprises both regions as well, and this is just the point that the critics of the present peace initiative are making against even a *temporary* unified district and that President Jayawardene has apparently recognized in calling for a referendum to be held in the Eastern Province in December, 1988, to settle this issue once and for all. Moreover -- and this concession is as significant as the first -- Tambiah advocates that the Tamils accept Sinhala as the only viable national language and recognize that a Sinhalese majority in government is "a fact of life."

Although there are additional details to Tambiah's solution, the above two sets of concessions are the cornerstones. The only weaknesses in his proposal is the above mentioned lack of explicitness in regard to an autonomous "Tamil district comprising both the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and his lack of attention to the language issue. All he writes on this score is that "the Tamil language cannot be the basis of a linguistic state (Ibid.), but he does not give any alternative. And, clearly, most Tamils, and not just the militants, are simply not willing to concede that Sinhala should be the sole national language. This is a surprising oversight on Tambiah's part, considering the attention he pays to language as a key ingredient in the evolution of the conflict. At any rate, the present government recognizes the importance of language in reaching a negotiated settlement, for it has offered to grant all *three* languages of Sinhala, Tamil, and English official status not only at the regional but at the national level as well.

Having summarized the main points of Tambiah's book and pointed out the problems with various parts of his argument, we are now in a position to examine this book's major flaw -- a flaw from which most of the above mentioned problems arise. That is, he begins the book by stating "This is an 'engaged political tract' rather than a 'distanced academic treatise'" (p. ix). And, indeed, much of the book, especially Tambiah's excessive writing style and liberal use of such epithets as "chauvinists" and "zealots," as well as his condemnation of the violence perpetrated against the Tamil people by the Sinhalese public and security forces, coupled with his rationalization and even justification of the Tamil militants' attacks on the security forces as "acts of desperation and hopelessness" -- in a word, to depict the Sinhalese as merciless" and the Tamil militants as innocent -- reads as a political tract written by an angry man. And who can blame Tambiah for being angry; one did not have to be a Tamil to feel outrage at the July, 1983 riots in Colombo, but for Tamils, no matter where they lived, this anger must have been felt at the core of their beings -- the kind of anger that makes one want to scream out in protest. This book, then, can be viewed as Tambiah's scream of protest. As one of my fellow academics in Sri Lanka commented, "That book was written from his heart, not from his mind."

But is this all that can be said about Tambiah's book -- that it is simply an emotional political tract written out of anger? No, and this is where the main problem arises. If it were only a political tract, one might have been surprised and perhaps even disappointed that a scholar of the eminence of Tambiah would have written such a thing, but one could not really fault him for writing it, nor would one find the kinds of flaws discussed above. For a political tract is simply propaganda written on the basis of a particular ideology, and Tambiah's book is much more than that. A political tract in its pure form does not try to muster cold, impersonal employment figures in support of its argument, and Tambiah's book does. A political tract does not try to find underlying causal factors in political, economic, religious, and historical processes, and Tambiah's book does. A political tract does not even pretend to be objective, and Tambiah's book does. Herein, then, lies the basic flaw of the book: Tambiah tries to engage in two mutually exclusive forms of discourse -- ideological propagandizing and objective analysis. In other words, while the core of his argument smacks of propagandizing, he attempts to adduce "objective" evidence and arguments to support it, and the result is a political tract that lacks an optimal emotional impact and an objective analysis that is biased and thus less than totally convincing. True, he begins to take a more sober, objective stance about half way into the book (beginning with Chapter Six), as if his initial anger that guided the first half had abated and given way to a more accustomed, reasonable, detached attitude that then guides the rest, but by then this transformation is too late to save the book. Tambiah's opening claim notwithstanding, this is an "engaged political tract" that *pretends* to be a "distanced academic treatise," and therefore falls short of both.

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