The two nations of Sri Lanka

by Martin Woollacott in Colombo

THE trumpets and drums reach a joyful crescendo as the bride, dressed in her new red sari, and with glittering bangles and nose jewellery, takes her place beside the equally resplendent groom. Flowers garland the wedding tent, lights flash on an ornate arch crowned by a figure of Krishna, there is the smell of burning sandalwood.

This is a Hindu wedding in Jaffna, the "capital" of the Ceylon Tamils, Sri Lanka's largest and angriest minority. Children tumble about while their parents sip passion fruit juice and some chew the betel given to every guest.

It is a happy occasion, but it is also a political event, in a town full of secessionist talk. One of the bride's brothers has just been released from goal. Another is still inside, one of more than a score of Tamil youths held without charge under emergency laws.

As the priest sprinkles holy water, a young man leans across and whispers: "It will be guerrilla war. When we are ready we will smash their army and send it back to Colombo like the rabble that it is."

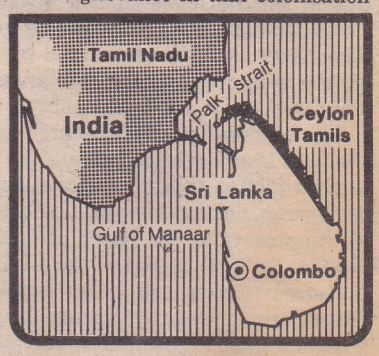
The State structures left behind by the British in the subcontinent have buckled and, in the spectacular case of Bangladesh, collapsed under the pressure of local nationalism in the years since independence. Now even Sri Lanka faces a separatist movement that is committed, at least verbally, to taking up to a fifth of the island's population and a third of its territory out of the State.

The Ceylon Tamils, who had a separate kingdom from the majority Sinhalese when the European invaders arrived, like to compare themselves with Scotland. If that is so, the Sinhalese are now in the position in which England would be if two proportion to their numbers, and that the balance must now be redressed.

The Tamil middle class speciality is the production of professionals for service outside Tamil areas, mainly in the Sinhalese part of Sri Lanka but also abroad. One typical family described to me includes a son in the Sri Lanka civil service, a lawyer in practice in Colombo, an accountant in East Africa, a doctor in London, and a teacher in Canada. Only one of the children remained in Jaffna.

This "talent industry" has been disrupted by Colombo's policies. What in practice it means is that the clever middle class boys who 10 years ago would have been on their way to a professional qualification of worldwide value are now sitting at home without a university place or a job.

The Tamil peasantry also has a serious grievance in that colonisation



schemes are inevitably changing the ethnic balance in some areas. There is much truth in the claim that the Indian Tamil plantation workers have been treated by successive Colombo Governments as an underpaid labour force without political or social rights. However, it is the embittered middle class that is leading the way.