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Colonization and Ethnic Conflict in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka

PATRICK PEEBLES

SRI LANKA'S INABILITY to contain ethnic violence as it escalated from sporadic terrorism to mob violence to civil war in recent years has disheartened observers who had looked to the nation as a success story of social and political development. In retrospect, Sri Lanka lacked effective local institutions to integrate the society, and the Sinhalese elite relied on welfare and preferential policies for the Sinhalese majority to maintain power. These alienated the minorities and resulted in Tamil demands for a separate state.¹ This article documents one of the more intractable areas in which ethnic conflict has arisen, land "colonization." Both major parties competed for the votes of the Sinhalese, but the creation of agricultural settlements in the undeveloped interior of the island, or colonization, is associated primarily with the United National Party (UNP). During the UNP government of recently retired President Junius Richard Jayewardene (1977–88), both the level of violence and the pace of colonization in the Dry Zone between the Sinhalese and Tamil majority areas increased.

This article describes the objective changes in population distribution that have taken place and raises some issues of general interest in the area of ethnic conflict. The current typology of ethnic identities is inadequate to describe these historical changes, so some discussion of ethnic categories is necessary. The people of Sri Lanka have been divided for census purposes into eight or more "ethnic groups or races." The Sinhalese make up 74 percent of the island's population, are predominantly Buddhist, and live primarily in the southwestern and central regions of the island. The secession movement has arisen only among those Tamils called "Sri Lanka Tamils" (13 percent of the population), who speak a dialect distinct from the Tamil dialects of India, are largely Saivite Hindu, and live mainly in the north and east of the island.

These two groups have much in common: both trace their origins to the earliest Indian settlers of the island; migration, intermarriage, and assimilation have made

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¹ A full account of the ethnic crisis is impossible here. For further reading see Roberts 1979; Manor 1979; Moore 1985; Peebles 1983, 1986; Pfaffenberger 1988; and Wilson 1988.

them physically indistinguishable. Under the influence of nineteenth-century German theories, however, some Sinhalese elites began thinking of themselves as racially "Aryan" (Gunawardena 1985). Sri Lanka Tamils for their part sometimes interpret the supremacy of the Vellala caste as evidence that their culture is "pure" Dravidian—that is, antedating "Aryan" Brahmin influence. Some Sri Lanka Tamils also have fallen prey to racist rhetoric, calling themselves a "Dravidian" race.

Some ethnic communities in Sri Lanka do not claim descent from the ancient civilization. They are the "Indian Tamils"; Muslims, or "Moors"; and small numbers of Eurasians, Malays, and Europeans. Indian Tamils are descendants of people who migrated from India in the nineteenth century as plantation fieldhands, urban laborers, and merchants. Moors form a majority in a few localities on the east and northwest coasts but otherwise live in both the Sinhalese-majority and the Tamil-majority areas.

Ethnic identities in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, constitute "a hierarchy of nested segments which are in opposition to segments of the same order" (Keyes 1976:206). The Sinhalese and Tamil linguistic groups are the first contrastive identity. The first order of segmentation among the Sinhalese is region. Four hundred fifty years of European colonialism separated the Sinhalese into distinct communities that have been separate "ethnic groups or races" for census purposes since 1901 (census reports since 1981 have merged the two). "Low-Country" Sinhalese form about 60 percent of the Sinhalese population and are politically dominant, better educated, and more urban. The "Kandyan" Sinhalese claim to be the heirs of the ancient civilization; they speak a recognizable dialect, have separate marriage laws, are predominantly rural, and make up the majority of colonists in the Dry Zone.

About 6 percent of the Sinhalese (primarily Low-Country) belong to a Christian minority. Sri Lankan Christians tend to identify with linguistic groups rather than their religious community (Stirrat 1984). Sinhalese Christians in particular do not challenge Buddhist preeminence and "have truly found a new equilibrium within the context of Sri Lanka" (Dissanayake 1984:4). There are in addition caste, caste grade, and kinship identities among the Sinhalese, which are generally subordinate to communal ones but remain important.

Geographic separation, economic stratification, disenfranchisement, restrictive citizenship laws, and physical violence have reinforced the segmentation of the Indian Tamils from other Tamil-speaking Sri Lankans. The census criterion for classification as an "Indian Tamil" since 1911 has been the inability to trace one's ancestry to a traditionally Tamil-speaking district in Sri Lanka (Devaraj 1985:201). Return migration to India in recent decades and assimilation to other communities have reduced the number of Indian Tamils to about 5 percent of the population. Many continue to live on tea plantations, but they also have settled to a limited extent in the Dry Zone. Indian Tamils are predominantly Saivite Hindus. Just over half of other Tamil-speaking Sri Lankans are Hindus; a third are Muslims and the remainder Christians. They are segmented by caste, religion, and region as are the Sinhalese.

The Sinhalese have been able to create an overarching identity that has transformed them into a distinct nationality. Nineteenth-century Sinhalese elites created a mythicized history tracing their ancestry to North Indian settlers of "Aryan" stock and to the ancient kingdom that flourished in the Dry Zone a millennium ago (Obeyesekere 1975). Obeyesekere has emphasized the myths that link the Sinhalese language and Theravada Buddhism as inseparable aspects of this identity. In forty years of political ascendancy since independence, the Sinhalese-Buddhist leadership has enforced numerous policies that have strengthened this identity. The process confirms that "ethnic communities are created and transformed by particular elites" (Brass 1976:229).

Tamil elites have had much less success in creating a Tamil nationality in Sri Lanka. Their mythology traces their origins even further back in history to Dravidian inhabitants of Sri Lanka, before the presumed Aryan settlements, and considers the northern and eastern regions to be a “Tamil homeland.” This initially had little appeal to most Tamil-speaking Sri Lankans, and there was little support even among Sri Lanka Tamils for secession until the political crises of the 1970s and 1980s.

The government of Sri Lanka has resisted the demands of its minorities in part because the Sinhalese form a dominant community that perceives itself to be disadvantaged relative to a minority community (Horowitz 1985:141–56). Defenders of this point of view claim that Tamils have achieved a superior position in the professions, government service, and business because of their character traits and favoritism during the British colonial period (1796–1948). Furthermore, they are alleged to be allied with the larger Tamil population of India against the Sinhalese.

Colonization is one policy meant to redress these perceived inequalities. During Jayewardene’s administration the government made colonization one of the central political appeals to the Sinhalese community by equating the colonists with the peasantry of the mythical Sinhalese past. The issue has intensified conflict because the colonization of the Dry Zone evokes not only the Sinhalese ethnic myths that idealize the prosperity and simple piety of the ancient Sinhalese but also the ones that exaggerate the hostility of the Tamils, who they believed threatened the very existence of Buddhism and eventually drove the Sinhalese from the Dry Zone. Like Malays, Fijians, Khmers, and others, the Sinhalese fear extinction at the hands of the contrastive ethnic community (Horowitz 1985:175–78). Tamils, by claiming a “Tamil homeland” in the north and east on the basis of their own ethnic myths, have heightened those fears and have made it impossible for the government to deal with the issue rationally. As violence mounted in the 1980s, colonization became a nonnegotiable subject for people on both sides and caused further violence.

The Demographic History of the Dry Zone

Reviewing the history of the population of the Dry Zone serves two purposes: it puts recent changes in population and ethnic composition into historical perspective, and it provides a context for the conflicting interpretations of the past invoked on both sides of the ethnic crisis. The rise, decline, and modern transformation of the Dry Zone is a fascinating historical drama; the mythicized historical arguments used by Sinhalese and Tamil elites are the matter of recent politics and have little to do with history.

Ancient Sri Lanka

There are no sizable rivers in Sri Lanka—although called a *ganga*, the Mahaweli River is only 207 miles long—but two monsoon seasons drench the island with heavy rainfall, more than 20 million acre-feet of which run through eighty-three small river basins in the Dry Zone (Arumugam 1969). The ancient Sri Lankans captured this runoff in an ingenious system of reservoirs and canals and cultivated rice extensively, beginning before the third century B.C. Migration into the mountains and the southwest came slowly; even after a millennium, they “had developed no technique of utilizing land on the highland regions nor in densely forested areas of heavy rainfall” (Udagama 1955:93).

A kingdom with its capital at Anuradhapura maintained this irrigation system for centuries, retaining its Theravada Buddhist identity while Hinduism flourished in South India. After the seventh century A.D. the cultural gaps between it and Tamil-speaking Hindu states on the continent increased, and the island, the kingdom, its subjects, and their language all gradually identified themselves as Sinhalese (*sinhala*) after the name of the dominant clan (Gunawardena 1985). Cholas from South India conquered the island in the tenth century and moved the capital from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa. Sinhalese kings made Polonnaruwa their capital when they regained power in the following century. They abandoned the Dry Zone in the thirteenth century; new invasions, administrative collapse, malaria, and perhaps climatic change drove them out (Indrapala 1971).

It is far easier to summarize the political history of the Dry Zone than to estimate its population and ethnic composition. The extent of irrigation works in the Dry Zone suggests a densely populated kingdom, although not all the works could have been in operation simultaneously. Speculations on the size of the population at its peak range from 4 million to 20 million people. Rulers continued to build monuments and massive irrigation works at Polonnaruwa, but the region appears to have been less of a population center than Anuradhapura. Population decline may have begun well before the invasions of the thirteenth century.

At some point malaria became endemic in the Dry Zone. There is mention at the beginning of the tenth century of the *upasagga* disease for which Kassapa IV (r. 898–914) built hospitals; it forced Kassapa V (r. 914–23) to recall a stricken military expedition from Madurai (Geiger 1953:164). If this refers to malaria, it may establish a starting point for population decline in the Dry Zone. Once begun, the decline of the Dry Zone continued, probably into the seventeenth century, as abandoned reservoirs provided breeding places for malarial mosquitoes.

Malaria did not prevent population growth along the north and east coasts and in the Wet Zone. The heavy rains of the southwest flush out potential breeding places, and the porous limestone of the Jaffna Peninsula does not allow stagnant ponds to form. Thus, population centers arose where malaria was transmitted at a low level. By the ninth century at the latest, there was some settlement of the lower valleys of the mountainous interior, and rulers in Anuradhapura had introduced coconut cultivation to the eastern and southwestern coasts (Udagama 1955:76). In Jaffna a virtually unlimited supply of water in the limestone subsoil made highly intensive agriculture possible with the development of well irrigation, composting, and crop rotation.

The ethnic composition of the Dry Zone before its abandonment is impossible to determine. Artistic and literary evidence suggests that the elite strata of the Sinhalese kingdom were physically heterogeneous (Gunawardena 1985:75). References to Tamils (*damila*) in Sinhala epigraphy and literature and the Tamil influence in Sinhalese culture confirm a close contact between the two cultures. By the time of the Chola conquests a distinct Tamil-speaking population existed within the kingdom, but it is not certain when it came into being (Indrapala 1966). The Chola conquest increased the size of the Tamil-speaking population in Sri Lanka. The thirteenth-century invasions may also have done so, although these do not appear to have originated in Tamil-speaking India.

The polarization of Sinhalese and Tamil linguistic regions is primarily a product of the period after the capitals were moved out of the Dry Zone, although it may have begun earlier. The Dry Zone reverted to forests thinly occupied by a mixture of Sinhala-speaking and Tamil-speaking cultivators and by forest-dwellers (*vedda*), while the population grew along the coasts. Scholars and nationalists alike often assume that the populace “drifted” from the Dry Zone to the coasts sometime between 1215 and 1500, but there is little evidence of internal migration. (This notion is necessary for the

Sinhalese and Tamil communities today to claim biological descent from their respective communities in the ancient population.) For the past millennium both communities in the Dry Zone have been subject to famine, disease, and drought, and individuals have assimilated to one of the locally dominant cultures.

The penultimate Sinhalese kingdom moved its capital to the southwest coast in the fifteenth century to share in the trade established centuries before by Muslim traders. Portuguese adventurers descended on the island in 1505 and gradually asserted their domination over the coasts, pushing Sinhalese rulers slowly inland. As first Portuguese and then Dutch colonial governments extended their conquests around the periphery of the island, the interior remained in the hands of a Sinhalese kingdom. Its political and population base was in the hills around Kandy, but it held nominal sovereignty over all parts of the interior not in colonial hands until its occupation by Britain in 1815.

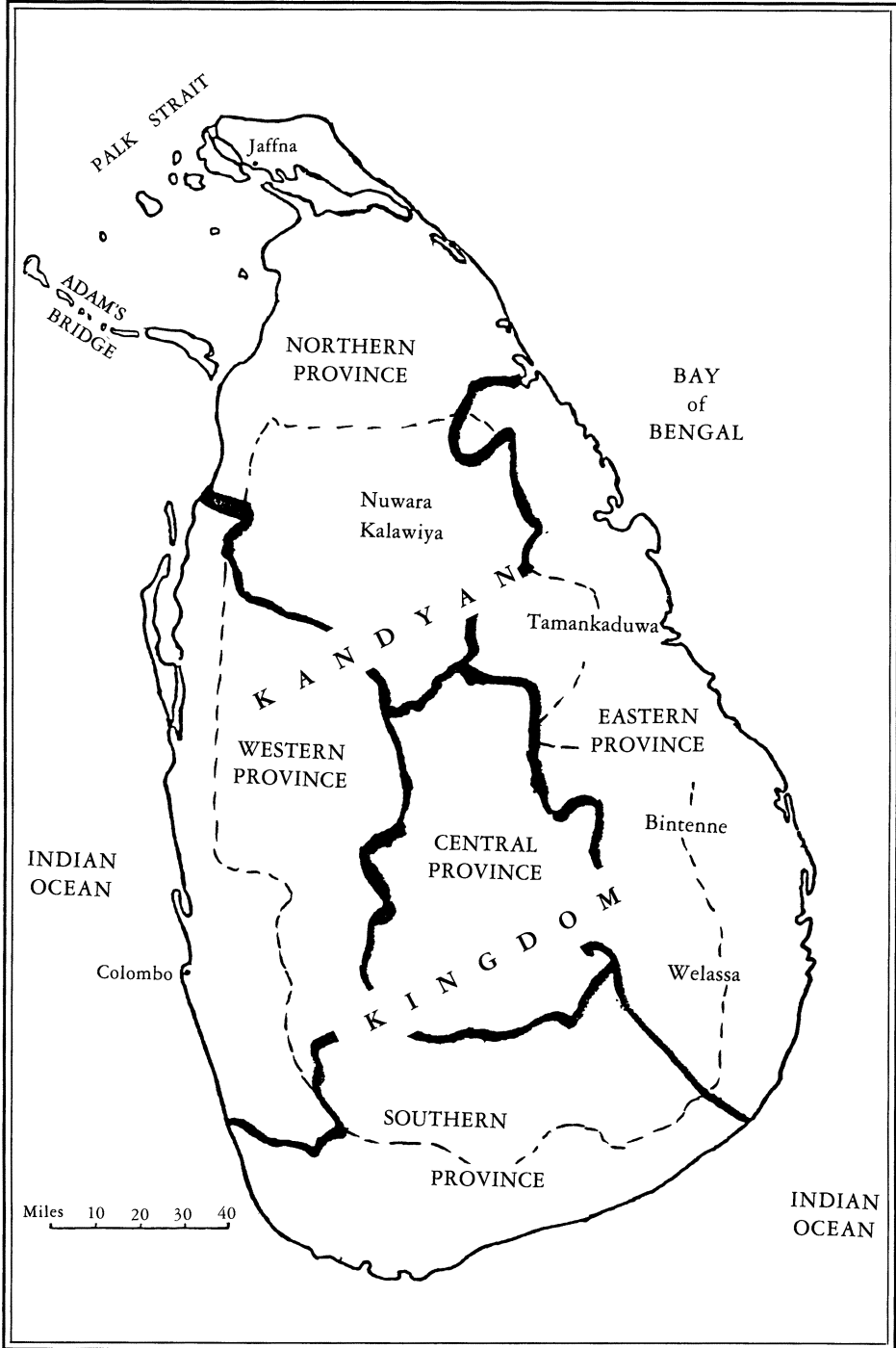
A Tamil kingdom with its capital in the Jaffna Peninsula first appeared in the thirteenth century and survived in a weakened form until conquered by the Portuguese in 1619. Both Sinhalese and Tamil rulers held portions of the Dry Zone at various times between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century, but chieftains called Vanniyaes loosely controlled the region. The Vanniyaes apparently were of South Indian origin but eventually included both Sinhalese and Tamil chieftains. During the last phase of Sri Lankan independence most of these chieftains established feudal ties with the Kandyan king.

British Colonial Impact on the Dry Zone

Sri Lanka's present population of approximately 16 million is the product of both immigration (mostly from 1840 to 1920) and natural increase in a population that was less than 2 million at the time of British conquest in 1796. The population approximately doubled in the nineteenth century, doubled again in the next fifty years, and has doubled once more in the past thirty-five years. Growth has been irregular ethnically and geographically. The Jaffna Peninsula, the east coast, and much of the southwestern Wet Zone are very densely populated, whereas there are still thinly inhabited regions in the Dry Zone.

In spite of the threat of malaria, as well as of water-borne and food-borne diseases such as amoebic dysentery, typhoid fever, and cholera, the growing population began to move into the Dry Zone again after the British suppressed a rebellion in the interior in 1818. Only for the nineteenth century do records give any indication of the population of the interior and its ethnic composition, and they suggest that the extent of internal migration before government-sponsored settlement began in the twentieth century was larger than either Sinhalese and Tamil propagandists realize. This is particularly true of Sinhalese cultivators in the "intermediate zone" between the southwest and the Dry Zone in Kurunegala and Puttalam districts, where coconut cultivation spread, and of Tamil-speaking cultivators—both Hindu and Muslim—on the east coast in Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts, where they extended rice cultivation.

The ruins of the ancient Sinhalese kingdom, particularly the massive reservoirs and the network of canals connecting them, testify to the productive potential of the abandoned land, and for the past century and more the population of the Dry Zone has increased as both colonial and independent governments have attempted to restore its productive capacity. The British administered the interior as a unit from 1815 until they dismantled the former Kandyan kingdom and distributed all but the small Central Province out to the four coastal provinces in 1833 (map 1). The Kandyan portion of



Map 1. Sri Lanka in 1833 after British redistribution of the former Kandyan kingdom.

NOTE: Dotted line indicates boundaries of former Kandyan kingdom.

Tamankaduwa Palata (now Polonnaruwa District) was attached to the Eastern Province, and Nuwara Kalawiya (now Anuradhapura District) became part of the Northern Province.

These administrative changes were intended to weaken the Kandyan elite and encourage the development of the interior by bringing it directly under the central administration. The British unified the island for the first time in six hundred years, breaking down barriers between the Tamil and Sinhalese regions and between the Kandyan and Low-Country Sinhalese. They opened the Dry Zone to development by the introduction of road building, the sale of waste land, the restoration of irrigation works in Kandyan districts, and the creation of the North Central Province in 1873 from Nuwara Kalawiya and Tamankaduwa. They also made Vavuniya in the Northern Province a separate district in 1878 to facilitate irrigation and settlement in the vicinity of the ancient capitals. Their efforts in irrigation development were irregular, however, and constrained by their insistence that cultivators repay the costs.

Nuwara Kalawiya continued to have a substantial population in traditional (*purana*) villages despite the ravages of malaria. It grew from an estimated 13,913 in 1824 to 58,643 in 1871. The former number is likely to be more of an underestimation than the latter, but it suggests a steady growth. By 1891 the population of Nuwara Kalawiya reached 75,000; about 80 percent of that population was Sinhalese, and more than 90 percent of the Sinhalese were born in the district. According to the Census of 1891, 15 percent of the district's population was born elsewhere, more than 3,000 of them in India, a result of settlement along the overland route used by plantation laborers from South India. Approximately 4,000 Kandyan Sinhalese, 1,000 Low-Country Sinhalese, 1,800 Sri Lanka Tamils, and 800 Muslims born elsewhere in Sri Lanka were enumerated in Nuwara Kalawiya in the 1891 census.

Population growth seems to have slowed after the British took an interest in the restoration of irrigation works, which may have raised mortality rates from malaria by increasing both the number of breeding places and the number of carriers. In 1911 Nuwara Kalawiya had a population of only about 80,000, living mainly in a thousand small villages, more than 90 percent of which had a Sinhalese majority. There were seventy-six Muslim villages and just eighteen Tamil villages in the district.

Tamankaduwa Palata, through which the Mahaweli Ganga runs, is Sri Lanka's premier colonization district, but it was virtually uninhabited in the nineteenth century. As the site of the capital of Polonnaruwa for more than two hundred years (993–1215) under both Tamil and Sinhalese rulers, it plays an important part in the mythology of both communities. It had fewer *purana* villages than Nuwara Kalawiya, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the British thought the Sinhalese population was dying out from intermarriage and disease. In fact, the population increased from early British times, albeit from a small base. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Tamankaduwa's population was mixed: "The Sinhala Pattuwa is Sinhalese; the Megoda Pattuwa is Moor; the Egoda Pattuwa Tamil" (Ievers 1899:90). Until 1911 it consisted primarily of *purana* villages, of which in that year twenty-two were Sinhalese, twenty Tamil, and sixteen Muslim. The Sinhalese population increased by a third in two decades, from 1,474 in 1901 to 1,970 in 1921.

In 1911 the director of the census wrote, "Many of the smaller Sinhalese villages are merely groups of huts in paddy fields," contrasting the Sinhalese view that "a solitary house, if there be people, must be regarded as a village" with a Tamil proverb, "A village without a market is not a village" (Denham 1912:23). The distinction suggests cultural differences in Dry Zone villages. History and ecology made the Sinhalese of the Dry Zone culturally distinct not only from the Low-Country Sinhalese

but also from the Kandyans of the hills (Leach 1960:117–18). In every census a number of villages disappeared and others appeared.

Resettlement of the Dry Zone began in earnest in the twentieth century. Government expenditures on irrigation had dwindled by 1905, but the revitalization of the Dry Zone then became a matter of particular urgency for Sinhalese nationalist politicians. It was particularly important for the Low-Country Sinhalese elite, for whom it was a means of appealing to the Kandyan Sinhalese, the people identified as suffering most from landlessness (Samaraweera 1981:140–41).

A land commission in 1927 declared that the government must hold crown land in trust for all the people and allocate it for their benefit. With this mandate the State Council under Don Stephen Senanayake's leadership planned colonization schemes in the Dry Zone in which landless Sinhalese peasants were to become independent peasant proprietors (Gunawardena 1981:27–28). The Land Development Ordinance of 1935 created mechanisms for colonization, and the first pioneers settled under the ordinance in 1939. The stated objectives of colonization were to relieve unemployment in the Wet Zone, to increase food production, and to establish prosperous settlements in the Dry Zone.

British land policies were only part of a broad transformation of Sri Lanka rural society before independence, including “the general commercialization of economic activity . . . the growth of ancillary service industries and trade and the spread of commercial crop production within the native economy. Concurrently, there was the disintegration of pre-colonial societal relations” (Peiris 1981:5). Senanayake and other Sinhalese elites claimed that British colonial policy had destroyed peasant society; they were motivated by “millennial visions” (Peiris 1981:24) of restoring the grandeur of what they conceived the island's past to be.

Colonization Since Independence

As the first prime minister, Senanayake “was responsible for infusing Sinhalese nationalism with the vision that the colonisation of the Dry Zone was a return to the heartland of the ancient irrigation civilization of the Sinhalese” (Moore 1985:45). By the late 1960s the government had alienated more than 300,000 acres of land to 67,000 allottees in major colonization schemes (Amerasinghe 1976:623). The largest of these, Gal Oya in the Eastern Province, created an area of irrigation for more than 120,000 acres between 1948 and 1952 (Uphoff 1982:209). Colonization has increased paddy production: cultivated acreage has doubled, and yields have more than doubled, primarily because of land development in the Dry Zone. The colonization of the Dry Zone by landless peasant cultivators from the Wet Zone remained one of the highest policy priorities for all governments until 1970. Before its defeat in 1970, the UNP created a Water Resources Development Plan (also called the Master Plan) for river development, under which 900,000 acres would be irrigated over a thirty-year period (Wijesinghe 1981:51). Of these, 650,000 acres were new lands and 250,000 were existing acres to be improved. Successes in the development of the region, however, have come at a high cost; a World Bank mission in 1966 severely criticized the low return on such investments (Amerasinghe 1976:624).

Tamil politicians did not share in the enthusiasm for colonization; they claimed even before independence that these policies confiscated their “traditional homeland” at an enormous cost in public revenues and transferred them to Sinhalese cultivators. The Tamil Congress complained of Sinhalese settlements in the Eastern and Northern Provinces to the Soulbury commission on constitutional problems in 1944 (de Silva

1986:213). Tamil elites objected to discrimination in settlements in Gal Oya, Allai, and Kantalai projects in the Eastern Province and repeatedly pointed out how such preference to settlers from other provinces violated the Land Settlement Ordinance of 1935 (Suntharalingam 1967, 1970).

The Federal party made colonization a political issue for Tamils from the time of its founding in 1949 (Wilson 1988:100). At its fourth annual convention on August 19, 1956, for example, it passed a resolution that said “the colonisation policy pursued by successive Governments since 1947 of planting Sinhalese population in the traditional homelands of the Tamil-speaking peoples is calculated to overwhelm and crush the Tamil-speaking people in their own national areas” and demanded the “immediate cessation of colonising the traditionally Tamil-speaking areas with Sinhalese people” (Federal Party 1974:unp). Sinhalese governments from both ruling parties have acknowledged Tamil concern over settlement policy: the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact of 1957 and the Senanayake-Chelvanayagam Pact of 1965 both recognized the special rights of Tamils in colonization schemes in the Northern and Eastern provinces (Manogaran 1987:189–90).

The general election of 1970 brought about a modification of land policy. The United Front (UF) government completed the first project of the Master Plan, a diversion of the Mahaweli at Polgolla, but shelved the remainder of the Master Plan. Instead it introduced sweeping land reforms (Samaraweera 1982). It nationalized nearly a million acres, including about one-fourth of the agricultural land in the island. The UF intended to use both plantation employment and collective agriculture as alternatives to peasant colonization to relieve unemployment and landlessness in Wet Zone villages—factors believed to have caused an insurrection of Sinhalese youth in 1971. At the time of its crushing defeat in 1977, however, it was enmeshed in deep economic difficulties and had made little progress in this direction.

Sinhalese-Tamil relations worsened in many ways under the UF government; although there were no new initiatives in colonization, it remained one of the issues that led to separatist demands. Tamil extremists began a campaign of terror, primarily against Tamil officials in the Jaffna Peninsula, to force the creation of a Tamil state of “Eelam,” and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) was created to contest elections on an explicitly secessionist platform. It listed the colonization of historically Tamil territory by Sinhalese in the Vaddukoddai resolution of May 14, 1976, as one of the nine justifications for the separate state of Eelam. It went on to win a sweeping victory in the July 21, 1977, elections as did the UNP.

Ethnic Redistribution in the Dry Zone

Any hopes that the colonization of the Dry Zone might alleviate population pressure in the Wet Zone were overwhelmed long ago by high birth rates. Even though the emigration of many Indian Tamils has reduced population growth by one million, population density continues to increase in every district (Kearney and Miller 1987:7). Colonization nevertheless has contributed to a spectacular transformation of the Dry Zone. Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa districts together had a population density of 14 persons per square kilometer in 1946; in 1986 they had densities of 94 and 91 persons per square kilometer, respectively. Batticaloa and Amparai districts increased from 29 (combined) to 141 and 101 (respectively), and Vavuniya District from 6 to 55 persons per square kilometer, over the same period. For the purpose of this article, it is not just the growth that is significant, it is that the growth resulted primarily from the settlement of Sinhalese Buddhists and their natural increase.

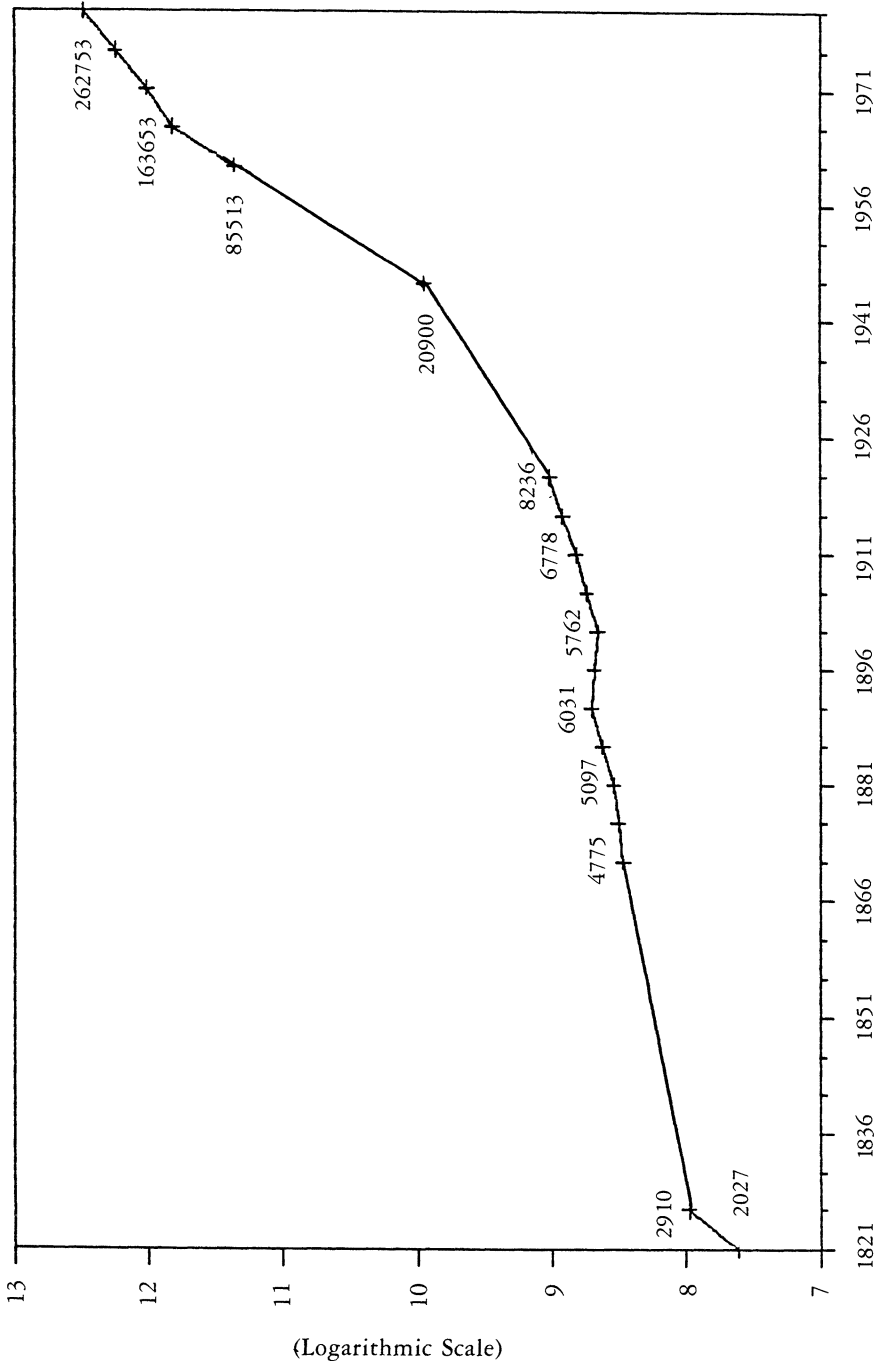


Fig. 1. The Population of Tamankaduwa, 1821–1981

Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, and Vavuniya districts fall entirely in the colonization areas of the Dry Zone, and Amparai District does almost entirely, but Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts do not. As an example of the pattern of ethnic redistribution I examine the eastern portion of the Dry Zone, which I define as Tamankaduwa Palata (Polonnaruwa District); Kadukulam Pattu West (Gomarankadawala and Morawewa) and Tambalagam Pattu (Kantalai and Seruwila) in Trincomalee District; and Panawa, Nadukadu (or Wewagam) Pattu, and Bintenne Pattu (Padiyathalawa, Lahugala, and Mahaoya) in Batticaloa District or Amparai District.

The population of Tamankaduwa/Polonnaruwa was growing even before 1921 at a faster rate than the island's, and since then colonization has produced a dramatic increase in the population (fig. 1). According to the 1946 delimitation commission, the district had a population of 20,900; by 1981 the district had a population of 263,000. It has the highest percentage of residents born in other districts of any district in Sri Lanka—including descendants, more than 70 percent of the inhabitants are the product of colonization (Kearney and Miller 1987:4). The non-Sinhalese population of Tamankaduwa increased from 9,200 in 1946 to 23,700 in 1981, roughly equivalent to the rate of natural increase for the island as a whole, suggesting that the settlers, whether colonists, squatters, or the descendants of either, were entirely Sinhalese. At the time of the 1946 delimitation, 56 percent of the population was Sinhalese, 15 percent was Sri Lanka Tamil, 23 percent Moor, and 7 percent other, primarily Vedda. According to the 1981 census, 91 percent was Sinhalese.

There is a similar but less spectacular pattern for the eastern Dry Zone as a whole. In the absence of complete census records, I have used electoral districts according to the delimitations of 1946, 1959, and 1976 to show population changes up to the beginning of the Jayewardene administration. For this purpose I have used Trincomalee, Mutur, Batticaloa, and Polonnaruwa seats in 1946; Trincomalee, Mutur, Amparai, Polonnaruwa, and Minneriya seats in 1959; and Seruwila, Amparai, Polonnaruwa, Minneriya, and Medirigiriya seats in 1976. (The statistics published by the delimitation commissions must be used with care because the territorial units sometimes differ from year to year. Accordingly, I have been conservative in my use of their figures; that is, they underestimate the growth of the Sinhalese population in the region.)

The districts are not congruent; they overestimate the Sinhalese population in the earlier years by including the towns of Trincomalee and Batticaloa in 1946 and Trincomalee in 1959. Even so, there were only 26,000 Sinhalese in the area in 1946. In 1959 the region had a Sinhalese population of 140,000 and in 1976, 265,000. The Sinhalese population of the eastern Dry Zone increased about five times from 1946 to 1959 and nearly doubled from 1959 to 1976, a tenfold increase in thirty years. The change in the distribution of the population was even greater: from 1946 to 1959 Sinhalese had increased from 19 percent to 54 percent. In 1976 they constituted 83 percent of the population. The Dry Zone has been transformed since independence from a plural society to a homogeneous Sinhalese Buddhist one. The Government of Sri Lanka was implementing the "millennial visions" of the Sinhalese nationalists.

Sinhalese and Tamil Homelands

The July 21, 1977, elections raised unfulfilled expectations that negotiations between the UNP and the TULF, both of which won sweeping victories, would settle the ethnic crisis. Soon after Jayewardene's election, the government introduced a program of economic liberalization and a series of development projects, including the

Accelerated Mahaweli Programme, to relieve economic pressures. It also initiated constitutional reforms to deal with some of the grievances of Tamils.

As late as May 1982 Mahaweli project officials claimed that Dry Zone settlements would defuse ethnic tension by reducing unemployment (Jones 1982). They were unduly optimistic. Earlier colonization schemes had divided the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority long before either Mahaweli river development or ethnic violence accelerated. Many Sinhalese equated the colonization of the Dry Zone with a restoration of the greatness of the ancient Sinhalese Buddhist kingdom. The UNP consciously evoked the image of an idyllic Buddhist past in which Dry Zone irrigation provided the resources for a prosperous and cultured civilization. Officials of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme appealed directly to this mythical past, in which Tamil Hindu invaders were hated enemies, to mobilize Buddhist support.

Tamil separatists countered this with a myth of their own, a "Tamil Homeland" (*paarampariyamaana taayakam*, literally "hereditary motherland") in the Northern and Eastern provinces. The concept is based both on the historical Tamil kingdom and on the Tamil-speaking population living there now. Initially Tamil separatists claimed parts of the Northwestern, North Central, and Southern provinces as part of "Eelam," relying on selective references to colonial maps and writings. Separatist maps showing Puttalam, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, and Amparai districts as areas of "Sinhalese colonisation" have been reprinted frequently.

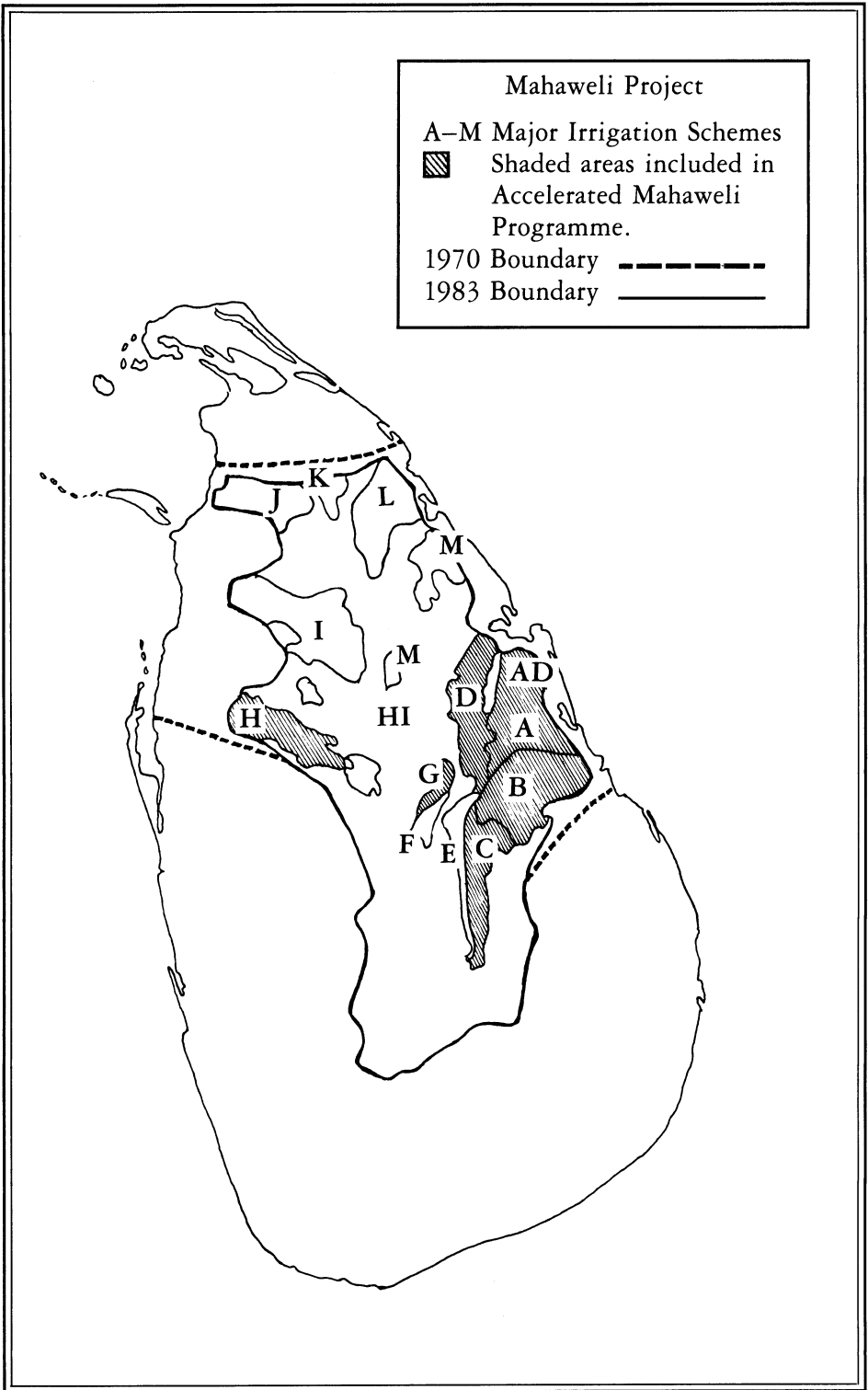
In the past decade violence unleashed by the competing myths has taken the lives of 16,000 Sri Lankans—Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim alike—many of them innocent residents of the Dry Zone.

Accelerated Mahaweli Programme

In 1977 and 1978 the UNP claimed that it would implement the entire thirty-year development plan proposed in 1968 in six years (map 2). Specifically, Jayewardene announced at a now-famous Vap Magula ceremony on October 27, 1977, at the supposed site of the lost capital at Panduvasnuwara (where his putative predecessor Vijaya was buried), "Our Government has decided to complete all three phases [of the Master Plan] in six years" (Jayewardene 1978:87). Some of the early propaganda about this Accelerated Mahaweli Programme was misleading; it claimed to have initiated some projects that were already underway, notably the Polgolla diversion (which began in 1970 and was completed in 1976) and the settlement of the Kala-Oya basin ("System H").

The Jayewardene government's program was a scaled-down version of the Water Resources Development Plan, depending for its success on massive foreign aid, continuous propaganda barrages, and creative arithmetic. It initially promised to bring the same amount of land into cultivation with just five major dams (each sponsored by a different foreign aid donor) and only six of the thirteen proposed irrigation systems (Wijesinghe 1981:51). It later explained, "What was meant by 'acceleration' was to undertake simultaneously a number of projects which under normal conditions would have been done sequentially" (*Economic Review* 1985:4). The propaganda succeeded in winning domestic and foreign support for the project, but it created further difficulties for Sinhalese-Tamil relations.

Dutch engineering consultants (NEDECO) pointed out in September 1979 that the settlement scheme was unrealistically ambitious. The government accepted the NEDECO recommendations and scaled down plans even further toward the end of 1980. Eventually four major dams were built and an estimated 390,000 acres of new



Map 2. The Mahaweli Project

lands, most of them in the Eastern Province in the Mahaweli and adjacent Madura Oya basins, were to be settled by 140,000 families—although NEDECO pointed out accurately that it would not be possible to settle that many families in six years (Wijesinghe 1981:53).

The successful completion of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme can be a source of pride to Sri Lankans regardless of ethnic identity, and so can the ability of the government to pay for them largely with foreign aid. The four dams have become local attractions, and plans also are under way to develop the reservoirs for foreign tourism. Employment and electrical power generation associated with the program have produced substantial economic growth for the nation as a whole, and the potential for agricultural production is high. The wisdom of the frantic pace of construction will be debated for decades, however, and its environmental costs have yet to be determined. This article considers the effect of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme, and colonization schemes in general, on ethnic relations.

A week after announcing the program Jayewardene said, "I am going to stake the entire future of the UNP on the successful completion of the Mahaweli Scheme" (Ministry of Plan Implementation 1981b:14). His statements at this time emphasized the employment potential of the project, both in construction and colonization, and there is no doubt that he intended the Mahaweli program to appeal to his Sinhalese constituency. His strategy is illustrated by the evacuation of families from lands flooded by the Victoria Dam project (*Ceylon Daily News*, Apr. 7, 1984, p. 8). There were 5,925 families resettled, a total of about 35,000 people. Approximately 85 percent of the people were Buddhists, 6 percent Hindus, and 7 percent Muslims. Most of the Buddhists were resettled downstream in a colonization scheme, and almost all of the Muslims and Hindus remained in Kandy District.

The choice of projects to be developed also reflects the focus on Sinhalese settlements. Under the Water Resources Development Plan systems J, K, and L, and part of system I fell within the Northern Province and were to irrigate 232,760 acres by a North Central Province canal. None of these systems was included in the Accelerated program, even though NEDECO recommended the North Central canal as technically feasible.

Perhaps even more significant for its ethnic implications, the development of the northern and eastern Dry Zone appears to be designed to exclude the development of the adjacent coasts. Maps of the Mahaweli Master Plan produced after 1977 circumscribe the irrigated areas on the north and east but include unirrigated areas in the Kandyan highlands. Even though most of the settlement was to be in the Tamil-speaking Eastern Province, the government neglected the integration of colonization schemes with Tamil urban centers. A proposed railroad was to link the settlements with the Sinhalese districts south of the central highlands, but not with the east coast. By way of contrast, earlier studies (e.g., Mendis 1973) assume that the Mahaweli project boundaries included both coasts.

Beyond providing direct economic benefits to the Sinhalese constituency, the Jayewardene government linked the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme to the restoration of the ancient civilization. At the Vap Magula, Jayewardene "played the historic role of the Sinhalese kings by entering the paddy field behind a team of buffaloes to cut the first furrows" (Moore 1985:45). Jayewardene frequently referred to the "golden threads" linking his administration with that of the ancient Sinhalese kings (Jayewardene 1986b). Officials constantly have equated the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme with the achievements of the ancient kings: "Irrigation reservoirs were known prior to the advent of Vijaya, in the 6th century BC. . . . Lanka, from very ancient times, had developed a hydraulic civilization that is unsurpassed" (Ministry of Plan

Implementation 1981a:176). They assume the people share this perspective: "The inherent feeling among the peasants was that the derelict ancient irrigation schemes should be brought back to their former glory" (Ministry of Plan Implementation 1981a:1). A pamphlet describing the Madura Oya dam construction, the publication of which "was made possible due to the kind patronage extended by the Hon'ble Gamini Dissanayake, Minister of Lands, Land Development, and Mahaweli Development," concludes that the irrigation system of the Maduru Oya "bears testimony to the glorious past of the Sinhalese Buddhist civilization of Sri Lanka" (Jayawardhana 1982).

The glorification of the ancient Sinhalese kingdom has reached new heights: historian K. M. de Silva, for example, inserts the following in a study of "managing ethnic tensions" in Sri Lanka:

The construction of canals and channels exhibited an amazing knowledge of trigonometry. . . . The discharge of water . . . was regulated with amazing skill and precision. . . . Sri Lanka [was] . . . one of the Great irrigation civilizations of the ancient world. . . . The scale of comparison is . . . with the major hydraulic civilizations of the ancient world, the fertile crescent of West Asia, and with China herself. Despite its diminutive size, Sri Lanka belongs to this superleague.

(de Silva 1986:7-9)

Buddhist predominance in government-sponsored colonization is not new; where Accelerated Mahaweli Programme settlements differ from earlier ones is in their emphasis on the religious and cultural infrastructure. The Ministry of Mahaweli Development emphasized from the beginning that its mission included cultural development. In its later reports this seems to eclipse other considerations:

The Mahaweli authorities . . . will not only lead the settlers towards material prosperity, but also provide them with spiritual guidance to make them morally upright. . . . On Poya days every family has been advised to go to temple, offer flowers, perform other rites, listen to sermons and observe *sil* [Buddhist precepts]. . . . Their engagement in rituals, ceremonies and reciting of Pali stanzas is only the first step in their spiritual ascent, as this only attunes the minds for higher and more important religious exercises.

(Ministry of Mahaweli Development 1984:93-5)

Planners may have expected this religious and cultural emphasis to provide a necessary ingredient for the healthy growth of a prosperous rural economy. They thought, for example, that a Buddhist society would "help to maintain peace, forge unity among settlers, campaign against alcoholic drinks and keep a watchful eye on unwary youths likely to be ensnared by the lure of drugs" (Ministry of Mahaweli Development 1984:95). Likewise the ministry planned to build meditation centers and to publish a booklet containing the *Sigalovada sutta* and the *Vyaggapajja sutta*, which provide codes of behavior for laypeople. The former has been called the "householder's book of discipline" (*gihī-vinaya*; Thomas 1933:198). The *Vyaggapajja sutta* stresses three factors for economic stability and well-being: "production of wealth through skilled and earnest endeavour," "protection [of wealth] and savings," and "living within one's means" (Karunatilake 1976:iii). They provide no guidance for the most immediate problem, survival in a civil war.

Mahaweli development seems to be proceeding in an even more exclusively Buddhist direction than the proposals suggest (Tennekoon 1988). As of late 1988 financial difficulties delayed the development of the infrastructure and there were only 113 new primary schools and 15 police stations, for example, for the 78,000 families settled to that point (*Ceylon Daily News*, Nov. 11, 1988, p. 3; *Sunday Observer*, Dec. 12, 1988,

p. 16). There were, however, 216 Buddhist temples (43 in System B, 41 in System C, 19 in System G, and 113 in System H). There were also 57 Buddhist temples in Udawalawe, a separate colonization scheme. The Mahaweli area—once an ethnically mixed area—had only 5 Hindu temples (*kovil*—it is not clear if this included Udawalawe.)

Colonization and Ethnic Conflict, 1977–88

President Jayewardene seems unrealistically to have expected that the 1978 constitution would resolve the ethnic crisis; instead, implementation of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme took place against the background of escalating political violence. The new constitution modified the wording of passages in the 1972 constitution to which Tamils had objected, and the government resisted Sinhalese extremist demands to further enhance the status of the Sinhala language and Buddhism. The TULF rejected the constitution, however, and Tamil extremists gained strength as negotiations faltered in 1979.

Although violence increased steadily until Indian troops, invited to implement the July 1987 peace accord, intervened militarily against the extremists, it is useful to distinguish between the periods before and after the riots of July and August 1983. The turning point toward civil war can be traced to two elections in 1982, particularly a referendum in December, that extended the life of Parliament rather than hold new elections and initiated the period of accelerating conflict.

Up to 1982 there were few new colonists in the Mahaweli region. In this period “encroachers” from existing colonies and villages and from other parts of the island outnumbered officially sponsored settlers (*The Island*, Dec. 6, 1983, p. 7). Encroachment has long been an inevitable consequence of small holdings and large families in colonization schemes, but in the 1970s it became an ethnic issue (Wijesinha 1986:51–54). An organization called the Gandhiyam movement resettled in Vavuniya District Tamil estate workers who had been victims of attacks by Sinhalese in 1977 or 1981. Their settlement was encouraged by Tamil separatists, and the government feared that these colonists would harbor separatist guerrillas or help to establish a de facto “homeland” through settlement in the Northern and Eastern provinces. It is claimed that Gandhiyam settled 85,000 people (Thornton and Niththyananthan 1984:57). As terrorist incidents increased after 1979, government security forces harassed the Gandhiyam movement and Tamil settlers were removed by force (Wijesinha 1986:59–60).

At the same time private groups were similarly creating Sinhalese settlements in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Minister of Industries and Scientific Affairs Cyril Mathew openly encouraged these encroachments. More important, encroachments in the Maduru Oya region of the Mahaweli program reportedly were encouraged by Gamini Dissanayake, Minister of Mahaweli Development, and N. G. P. Panditaratne, Chairman of the Mahaweli Board (Wilson 1988:161). At this time Panditaratne was president of the UNP and Mathew was its general secretary.

The dubious mandate of the December 1982 referendum convinced the president that the people agreed “a strong hand was needed to deal with the Tamil separatist movement and its terrorist wing” (de Silva 1986:335). As Sri Lankan security forces tried ineffectually to suppress the extremists, terrorism increased, as did organized brutality against Tamils, culminating in widespread mob violence against them in July and August 1983.

Minister of National Security Lalith Athulathmudali relied on draconian measures in the Dry Zone such as the forcible eviction of Tamil encroachers, the evacuation of

entire villages, and the arming of settlers and outsiders as vigilantes. When the guerrillas gained the upper hand in the Eastern and Northern provinces, they raided isolated settlements, culminating in the May 14, 1985, attack on Anuradhapura that officially left 146 Sinhalese dead. These raids created a Sinhalese refugee population in the tens of thousands. The intervention of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987 improved security in the Dry Zone, but massacres continued into 1989. In the Dry Zone, the alternative to resolving the ethnic conflict is maintaining Buddhist colonies in spite of massacres by Tamil separatist guerrillas—which at the time of this writing occur weekly.

Negotiating Land Settlements

The UNP had acknowledged the importance of colonization for Tamils by including it in its election manifesto as one area of Tamil grievances to be resolved (United National Party 1977:11). The party reemphasized its importance in a policy statement two weeks after the election (Ministry of Plan Implementation 1981b:4). Nevertheless this issue became one area in which the Jayewardene government made no concessions in the early negotiations (Leary 1983:38–39). According to A. J. Wilson, who mediated between the government and the TULF in this period, “the President had pledged not to disturb the demographic composition of the traditional Tamil homelands” (1988:161), but he “turned a blind eye” toward Sinhalese colonization under the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme (1988:143).

The Jayewardene government’s unwillingness to negotiate an issue that it recognized as a valid grievance can be explained in part by the success of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme. The propaganda campaign that the Ministry of Mahaweli Development launched was irreconcilable with Tamil claims that much of the territory to be colonized was a “Tamil homeland,” and the government seems to have removed the issue from the bargaining table early in Jayewardene’s administration. Indeed, the prime minister may have believed that intransigence in this area would have won Sinhalese support for concessions in other areas. The colonization aspect of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme can be seen as a direct appeal to the Sinhalese majority that would counterweigh accusations of leniency toward separatists arising from compromises with Tamils in language, education, employment, and local autonomy.

After Parliament expelled the TULF on October 20, 1983, the possibilities for a negotiated settlement seemed remote. Nevertheless, negotiations resumed in early 1984, but colonization soon emerged as an area of major disagreement. By the time an abortive all-party conference was dismissed in December 1984, military considerations outweighed negotiations. Jayewardene made no concessions regarding colonization until meeting with Rajiv Gandhi in October 1985, when he gave assurances that future colonization would be based on existing ethnic proportions to preserve current demographic balances.

In December 1985 the TULF proposed that colonization be devolved to the provinces. It objected to the government’s use of the phrase “national settlement schemes” to exclude the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme and other large projects from devolution and “national ethnic ratio” to justify Sinhalese colonization in the Eastern and Northern provinces. It demanded that the remainder of land under the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme be reserved for Tamils and Muslims (Jayewardene 1986a). The government rejected the TULF proposals outright and proposed a Natural Resources Development Commission to determine colonization policy.

Government proposals in the summer of 1986 specifically discussed the distribution of land grants in the colonization projects. These appear to have been unchanged in subsequent developments leading to the India–Sri Lanka accord of July 1987 and the devolution of power to provincial councils. The proposals include an addendum on the devolution of power in respect to land and colonization (*Ceylon Daily News*, June 26, 1986; p. 8). It states, “Rights in or over land, land tenure, transfer and alienation of land and land improvement will devolve on Provincial Councils,” except land required for the purposes of the central government and interprovincial projects such as the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme. Land use must agree with national land policy set by a national land commission, on which provincial councils will be represented. On the crucial issue of colonization, the government allocated the estimated 101,483 remaining allotments in Systems A, B, C, D, G, and H of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme to population distribution—75,504 Sinhalese, 12,787 Sri Lanka Tamils, 7,509 Muslims, and 5,683 Indian Tamils. Allotments previously made to Tamils and Muslims in Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts (882 and 1,481, respectively) were to be deducted from their totals. Within provinces “the ethnic proportions within the Province would be the best applicable principle” for the distribution of land grants.

Government policy thus adopted a quota system with a limited amount of devolution to the provinces. In the Mahaweli program it made no concessions to the existing population structure but in fact adjusted the figures in favor of the Sinhalese: at the end of 1985, there were 49,554 families officially settled in Systems B, C, G, and H of the Mahaweli area; presumably all but the 2,363 mentioned above were Sinhalese (Central Bank 1987:118). Existing and projected grants together result in a total of 151,037 allotments, of which 125,058, or 82.8 percent, have been or will be given to Sinhalese settlers.

The new policy only deals with official colonization under the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme. It does not cover encroachers, who probably number in the tens of thousands, or refugees, who certainly do. Thus, at the time of this writing the Government of Sri Lanka has made slight concessions in the area of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme with no provisions for future land development or reconstruction. The most positive aspects of the policy are that it is a first step away from thinking of the Mahaweli program as an exclusively Sinhalese entitlement and that it provides a formula that can be the basis of negotiation in calmer times.

Limits of Ethnic Preference

Why could Sinhalese and Tamil leaders not arrive at a reasonable compromise on colonization, even after elected leaders began to lose control of the situation? The answer is that the negotiators debated colonization exclusively in terms of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism, which do not touch on the complexities of the issue and which reinforce the irreconcilable ethnic myths. Their task was made more difficult because Jayewardene’s exploitation of Sinhalese nationalist myths stimulated antagonistic public debate on the issue.

Since the onset of civil war in 1983, there has been much public discussion of the ethnic dimension of colonization. Sinhalese writers equate the Tamil criticism of government policy with the concept of a “Tamil homeland,” which they consider an “audacious falsification of ancient and modern Sri Lanka history” (Iriyagolla 1985:1). Many Sinhalese were horrified when the International Commission of Jurists gave the term legitimacy by using it in a report (Leary 1983:38).

Jayewardene faced a violent reaction by Sinhalese extremists within his own party to the demand for a Tamil homeland. Cyril Mathew, the most virulent critic of the concept, claimed that 261 Buddhist sites in the Northern and Eastern provinces were being destroyed by Tamils to establish their claim (Mathew 1981). Mathew appealed to the United Nations to prevent what he considers desecration (Mathew 1983). He was eventually dismissed from his ministry but remained an influential leader of the UNP.

Sinhalese polemicists also linked Tamil criticism of colonization directly to the mythicized history of the Sinhalese. The most outspoken writer in this regard has been the Buddhist monk Madihe Pannaseeha. He argues that the depopulation of the Dry Zone was caused by "wars that the Tamils waged on Sinhala people." Colonists were selected on a "scientific basis": a majority were Sinhalese because the Sinhalese have a much higher unemployment rate and because it is the southwest that is overpopulated, a "situation aggravated by the displacement of the Sinhala people by the Indian Tamils on the estates." Furthermore, the purana villagers displaced by the irrigation works "are all Sinhala people" and add to the numbers of Sinhalese settlers. As a solution to ethnic conflict, Pannaseeha advised "the Prime Minister to send a permanent detachment of the Army to the North and East together with the settlement of colonies of Sinhala people there" (Pannaseeha [1979]:16–18).

The TULF for its part continued to counter Sinhalese nationalist demands with the idea that the Tamils are a distinct nationality. This creates a double problem: the concept has no more historical validity than that of Sinhalese nationalism, and the segmented identities within the Tamil-speaking population are much stronger than those within the Sinhalese-speaking population. The separatist literature confuses two different ideas: the population whose native language is Tamil and the Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic community. The separatists use *tamir peesum makkal* (Tamil-speaking people) and *tamir peesum inam* (Tamil-speaking race) interchangeably. The former have had legitimate grievances against the government of Sri Lanka since independence and the various pacts and agreements described above refer to them, but few of them consider themselves a "race."

The government's response to Tamil criticism of Sinhalese colonization concentrates on this incongruity. Until forced by circumstances, the government denied separatists, even the legally elected TULF, a right to discuss national issues such as colonization. This led the government into incongruities of its own, such as when it denied the TULF a right to speak for Indian Tamils but at the same time dispossessed Indian Tamil encroachers in the Dry Zone on the grounds that they promoted Tamil separatism.

The scholarly literature on colonization has not escaped the preoccupation with ethnic nationalism. Geographer Gerald H. Peiris uses the fact that Sinhalese villages existed historically in the Eastern Province to defend twentieth-century land settlement policies. His unpublished but widely circulated paper (1985) establishes that there were at the time of the 1921 census numerous Sinhalese colonizations in what is now the Eastern Province. (For a more detailed critique of this paper, see Coomaraswamy 1986, 1987.) "The alleged Sinhalese 'intrusion' into the 'Traditional Tamil Homeland' is a myth," he writes. "State-sponsorship has admittedly been a vital element in land settlement schemes. . . . But neither in this nor in State responses to Crown land encroachment do we find any evidence of discrimination against the Sri Lankan Tamils" (Peiris 1985:34). Peiris conveys the false impression of a homogeneous Sinhalese population and suggests that little demographic change took place in the Dry Zone before 1921. He reinforces the myth that the Sinhalese occupied the entire island until they somehow lost parts of it to the Tamils: "Up to about the 13th century the most powerful

Sinhalese rulers did exercise sovereignty over the entire island." In the nineteenth century, "there was a continuing expansion of the non-Sinhalese population in several areas of the Dry Zone" (1985:12). "For the Sinhalese in these areas, the 19th century is a period of continuing recession" (1985:13). Finally, "the pattern as it prevailed in 1921 represents what may be regarded as the culmination of a long drawn-out historical process featured, on the one hand, by territorial advances of the Tamil population and, on the other, retreat and recession of the Sinhalese population" (1985:16).

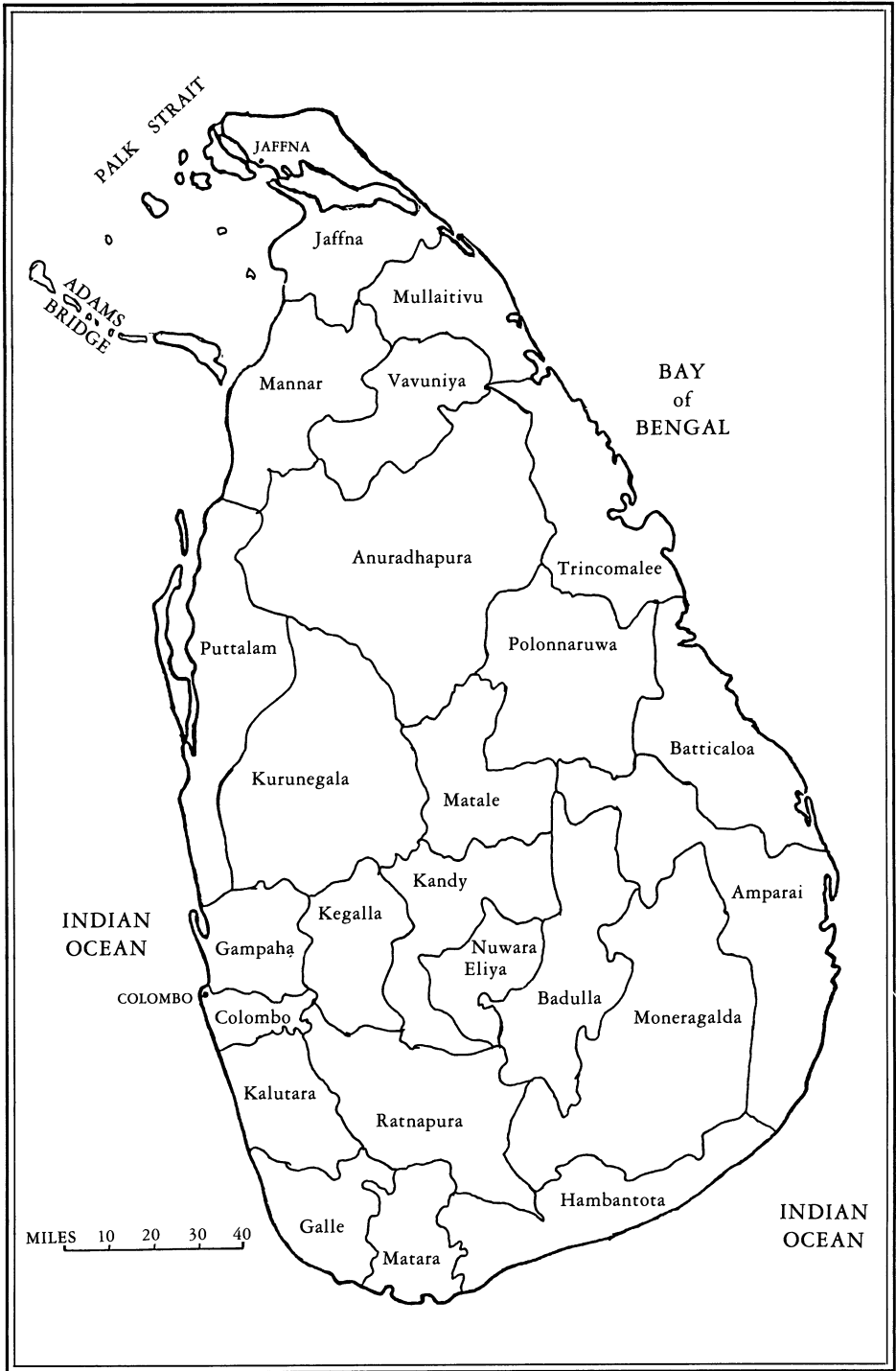
Peiris is covering the ethnic myth with an academic veneer. There had been complex changes in the size and distribution of population in the Dry Zone during the century before 1921 (which is the year of the last complete census before government-sponsored colonization). The changes cannot be reduced to the assertions that the Dry Zone "remained throughout a 'traditional homeland' of the Sinhalese peasantry" (Peiris 1985:34) and that the Sinhalese population was retreating from Tamil settlement. The Dry Zone contained Muslim and Tamil villages as well as Kandyan Sinhalese villages, and the notion of an ethnic homeland would have been alien to all these villagers. Peiris does not offer any suggestions for future policy other than an implicit justification for future Sinhalese colonization, but two other scholars have made explicit recommendations.

After the 1983 riots Godfrey Gunatilleke of the Marga Institute, a Colombo think tank, argued that "inter-racial equity" in land settlement could be based either on the ethnic composition of the nation or on the existing ethnic composition of districts. By the former criterion 74 percent of new grants in colonization districts would be given to the Sinhalese, but by the latter only 55 percent of grantees would be Sinhalese. As a compromise he suggested that the Sinhalese should receive a quota of 25 percent of the land in Vavuniya, Mannar, and Mullaitivu districts, and 50 percent of the grants in Amparai District (map 3). This would have made the total grants to Sinhalese colonists about 60 percent of the total. As a result there would be more than 90,000 new Sinhalese settlers in Mannar, Mullaitivu, and Vavuniya districts by 1991, raising the Sinhalese population from 10 to 18 percent (Marga 1985:50).

It should be noted that Gunatilleke's essay does not present an accurate picture of changes in the Dry Zone and seems designed to minimize the extent of Sinhalese colonization there. Gunatilleke's statistics emphasize the period from 1963 to 1981, thus excluding the massive extent of Sinhalese colonization before 1963, concentrating on the 1970s (during which there was little colonization), and ignoring the rapid changes under way in the Mahaweli region at the time he was writing. He does not consider previous benefits in his criteria of equity; on the contrary, he uses the population settled in Sinhalese-majority districts to justify the further colonization of Sinhalese in Tamil-majority districts (Marga 1985:table 13).

In addition, Gunatilleke discusses colonization almost exclusively in the "predominantly Tamil districts" rather than in general. He points out that the Tamil-speaking districts cover 25 percent of the island's area, but the Sri Lankan Tamil population in those districts is only 5 percent of the nation's population and as such must expect some Sinhalese colonization in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Furthermore, equity in land settlement, he writes, must consider landlessness and population pressure and therefore would show preference to the Sinhalese because "the pockets of highest density and land hunger are to be found in the south-west and hill region among the Sinhala majority" (Marga 1985:42).

These proposals are more conciliatory to Tamils than the government's and they do not invoke historical claims to the Dry Zone, but they still are based on Sinhalese nationalist ideology. Gunatilleke professes to confine his paper "to the relations between the Sri Lanka Tamil minority and the Sinhala majority" (Marga 1985:1), but in fact



Map 3. Sri Lanka: Districts

he discusses various ethnic identities selectively. At one point he asserts, "The Tamil minority is in ethnic, linguistic and religious terms, a part of the larger Tamil community in the neighboring State of Tamil Nadu" (1985:2-3). At another he stresses the high educational level of the "Jaffna Tamil Community" (1985:15). He makes no distinction between Kandyan and Low-Country Sinhalese regarding colonization but points out the differences in educational levels of the two (1985:7).

The idea that the Sinhalese, as an ethnic community, suffer more than others from land hunger and population pressure is a recent one; landlessness is more acute among Kandyan Sinhalese than among the relatively urbanized Low-Country Sinhalese. Landlessness is greatest among Indian Tamils, but Gunatilleke mentions them only in reference to Sinhalese fears that their settlement is "part of the separatist strategy" (1985:40), which he does not dispute.

Another geographer, Chelvadurai Manogaran, presents a Tamil point of view (1987). Unlike Gunatilleke, he considers colonization as a whole; unlike Peiris he finds much evidence of discrimination against the Sri Lanka Tamils: "Massive irrigation and land development projects . . . are designed to improve the economic conditions of the Sinhalese districts and Sinhalese peasantry, [but] steps have not been taken by Sinhala governments to improve the economic conditions of the people in the predominantly Tamil areas" (1987:95). Moreover, "more than 165,000 Sinhalese have been added to the population of the Eastern and Northern provinces through colonization schemes between 1953 and 1981" (1987:97). Unlike Gunatilleke, he points out that the Sinhalese population of the Eastern and Northern provinces is concentrated in a few assistant government agent divisions. This concentration "and gerrymandering have resulted in more political leverage for the Sinhalese living in some Tamil districts" (1987:143-44).

Manogaran suggests a different sort of compromise: a solution to the ethnic crisis could result from redefining the remaining Tamil-speaking districts as the "homeland" (1987:5). That is, rather than establish a fixed quota of Sinhalese settlements within Tamil districts, simply move the line between the two regions. This proposal overcomes the difficulty posed by the fact that the boundaries of the Northern and Eastern provinces do not correspond to linguistic divisions.

The flaw in Manogaran's proposal is his assumption that his redefined Tamil-majority area would be a "Tamil homeland" within which grievances could be redressed. He states that Sri Lanka Tamils "lived as a distinct nationality" (1987:84) in the Tamil-speaking regions. Furthermore, they "continued to adhere to their traditional values and culture wherever they settled outside their homeland, returning to their place of birth in northern and eastern Sri Lanka after retirement" (1987:85). This obviously does not apply to the Sinhalese, Moors, and Indian Tamils now living in those provinces. In addition, many Sri Lanka Tamils have settled permanently outside the north and east and show little indication of returning. The 165,000 Sinhalese colonists he mentions in the north and east, for example, roughly equal the number of Sri Lanka Tamils in Colombo District (before the 1983 riots, at least). It is highly unlikely that they would consider exchanging places with the colonists.

Conclusion

I have shown the transformation of the Dry Zone from a sparsely populated and unhealthy but ethnically diverse region to a rapidly growing and almost exclusively Sinhalese and Buddhist one. Tamil protests against this transformation seem to have been followed by intensification rather than moderation. Polemicists such as Madihe

Pannasiha and Cyril Mathew react violently to the claims of their Tamil counterparts. Scholars on both sides of the issue frame their analyses in the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism.

What is to be done? The first and obvious prescription of this article is for a better understanding of Sri Lankan history to raise the level of debate among scholars and policymakers. It is impossible to write a history of Sri Lanka without reference to the various linguistic, regional, caste, and other identities of the people, but the only certainty is that the present configuration of segmentation and salience is a poor guide to the past.

The discussion of colonization as an issue in ethnic conflict must begin with an acknowledgment that colonization has been a policy of present Sinhalese nationalism. Neither the Sinhalese predominance in the colonies nor the Buddhist character of the settlements is by itself objectionable; it is possible that these are in the long-term interests of the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, the insistence that such colonization is a Sinhalese entitlement on historical grounds, in which the resources of the state are dedicated to one community with no comparable benefits to others, is intolerable.

It is impossible to tell at this point how the National Land Commission under President Ranasinghe Premadasa will distribute land grants when conditions permit. There is no doubt that Sinhalese leaders anticipate further Sinhalese colonization of the Dry Zone including the Tamil-speaking districts. It is unlikely, however, that any government suggesting a reversal of colonization policy or even a substantial amount of Tamil colonization in the remaining systems of the original plan can survive.

Concessions to the minorities would need to be made in other policies. They would convince the minorities that the government is fair, thereby making it possible to suppress the terrorists among the separatists. There are opportunities for redressing inequities in development programs under the provincial councils. For example, irrigation water for the Northern Province will come from the proposed North Central canal, which will be under the jurisdiction of the National Land Commission. The construction of this canal and the allocation of a substantial proportion of its water to the Northeastern Provincial Council would be one such benefit. If this is politically impossible, an obvious alternative is concessions in the area of industrial and tourist development in the north and east (including an often-mentioned international airport for Trincomalee). Such a policy would create economic and social ties between the Buddhist agricultural settlements and the nearby Tamil coasts that would reduce ethnic conflict. It would need to be accompanied by an educational campaign that stressed present realities over ethnic myths to have any hope of success.

The Sri Lankan experience shows the limitations of the "politics of ethnic preference" (Horowitz 1985:186). Using history as a charter of rights for one ethnic community invites ethnic conflict. For half a century the government implemented a colonization policy for the benefit of the Sinhalese majority. Tamil protests were ignored with apparent impunity. The Jayewardene government carried the policy to a point where there was no room to reconcile the extremes of Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil separatism. The result has been the maintenance of Sinhalese Buddhist colonies at the price of massacres by Tamil separatist guerrillas.

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