

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

Akhilesh Pathak^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Nationalism as a concept could be the concern of political scientists, but is it purely political in nature? Are there neurological connections that revolve around one of the highly evolved capacities of human beings as compared to other species; that is the ability to use language for communication? It is only because we are endowed with a machinery of cognition that receives and analyzes information from the external world and initiates us into identifying and assigning a set of characteristics to the objects and ideas we encounter in our everyday encounters with the multitude of events of the world. Karl Popper hinted towards the dichotomous relationship between 'nominalism' and 'essentialism', with the aid of which we classify and label the entities around us. While the debate between 'reason' and 'emotion' has stayed alive for thousands of years tracing its origin to the antiquity coinciding with the heydays of the Hellenic glory or the ancient times of the Nyaya-Mimansa school of Indian philosophy, scholars and thinkers have shown a strong tendency to separate out the 'objective' from the 'subjective', a necessary corollary of the distinction between 'reason' and 'emotion'. The difference could be very well transposed upon the difference between 'objects' and 'ideas'. Hence, one needs to attempt at unravelling the emotional-psychological basis of nationalism.

Keywords: Nationalism, Neuroscience, Language, Sri Lanka, Sinhalese, Tamil, Buddhist.

The Kantian notion of classifying things as 'things as they appear' and 'things in themselves' opened up an entire domain of sense-perception that lies beyond the capacity of human cognition to perceive, understand and classify certain objects.² Not just objects, the inability of the human mind to properly make sense of and define certain ideas is equally relevant from the point of view of what Kant proposed more than two centuries ago. Having recognised the difficulty, one is perplexed over the fact that no matter how much we deliberate upon some ideas as being incomprehensible and unintelligible, we are forced to live with the ideas. It is only because we are endowed with a machinery of cognition that

¹ Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

² It forms the defining argument of Immanuel Kant's first and probably the most important philosophical work, *Critique of Pure Reason* originally published in 1781.

*Responding Author

Received: May 30, 2017; Revision Received: June 16, 2017; Accepted: June 30, 2017

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

receives and analyzes information from the external world and initiates us into identifying and assigning a set of characteristics to the objects and ideas we encounter in our everyday encounters with the multitude of events of the world. Karl Popper hinted towards the dichotomous relationship between 'nominalism' and 'essentialism', with the aid of which we classify and label the entities around us³. While the debate between 'reason' and 'emotion' has stayed alive for thousands of years tracing its origin to the antiquity coinciding with the heydays of the Hellenic glory or the ancient times of the Nyaya-Mimamsa school of Indian philosophy, scholars and thinkers have shown a strong tendency to separate out the 'objective' from the 'subjective', a necessary corollary of the distinction between 'reason' and 'emotion'. The difference could be very well transposed upon the difference between 'objects' and 'ideas'. If the difference was a rigid affair, it would have been difficult to apprehend the reality 'out there' with some clarity. A brilliant explanation that hints towards the elimination of this difference sprang from the classic work by Ludwig Wittgenstein who clubbed both ideas and objects together into a solitary category called the 'pictures of reality'⁴. That makes our lives a whole lot easier. It solves an age-old problem of considering subjectivities such as emotions as inexplicable and unintelligible. But owing to the fact that these are also pictures of reality, one can very well describe the nature and type of the pictures. They could be analyzed morphologically that unambiguously explains the essential character of the pictures that the human mind perceives.

At this juncture, it becomes imperative to ask a couple of questions: Does 'Cartesian Dualism' exist in the realm of group behaviour? Is it mind or is it body that plays a decisive role in shaping one's understanding with regard to the particular group to which one belongs? Is there a water-tight compartmentalisation between the individual and the collective? Although there is a sociological explanation for the second question in Durkheim's thesis of social facts that undermines the place of the individual vis-a-vis the collective explained through his concept of 'social facts'⁵. Durkheim (1895) was of the opinion that the social facts have a coercive effect upon the individuals who act in accordance with the influence of these social facts. Not only are they coercive, but it is also external to the individuals and the individual has no role in manufacturing them. He or she is simply a subject living under the influence of social facts. Furthermore, Durkheim suggests that one does not outlive the social facts. In fact individual lives take birth and perish, but social facts survive beyond it. However, the issue under consideration is not as simple as it sounds. More than a hundred years have passed since Durkheim attempted a sociological explanation of the interrelationship between the individual and the collective. In the twentieth century, the field of academics has drawn heavily from the 'Culture and Personality School' led by some eminent scholars such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. Thus, there has been a shift in focus from the 'collective' in Sociology to a bilateral relationship between the individual and the collective called society.

3 For a detailed discussion on the topic, see *The Poverty of Historicism* by Karl Popper (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1957:26-27).

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein gave this concept in the only publication that came during his lifetime, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* published in 1921.

5 For a detailed discussion, see *The Rules of Sociological Method* by Emile Durkheim published in 1895.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

John Donne, in one of his famous poems, asserts: “No man is an island, Entire of itself”⁶. It is a clear indication in favour of the primacy of the collective over the individual. Carl Gustav Jung theorised Donne's ideas with the help of his newly coined term, 'collective unconscious'⁷. Clearly displaying the shades of Freudian influence that engulfed his imagination in the early years of his life, Jung seems to have borrowed the concept of the 'unconscious' from Freud. He simply suffixed the term with the word, *collective*. Having discovered the over-arching impact of the collective ways of acting and thinking, the social scientist can hardly afford to be complacent with the nature and extent of the understanding she develops. The pointer once more tends to point towards the Kantian problem that concerns itself with the paradoxical situation in which the objective reality is perceived only with the aid of subjective experience⁸. Such subjectivity is of course an individual affair. Thus, it is the individual mind that receives and processes the data that happens to pour in from the world outside. Consequently, there has to be a shift from the classical sociological approach to a more psychological, rather a social psychological approach to the idea of individual living in a group and identifying themselves according to the group identity.

The Psychological Angle

William James could be regarded as the pioneer in the field of behavioral sciences that seek to attempt an explanation of individual behaviour in the social context. He was perhaps the first to introduce the concept of 'self' in the realm of social sciences. Taking a psychological standpoint, James classified the self as 'spiritual self', 'material self' and 'social self'⁹. When talking in terms of the bilateral ties between the individual and the collective, it is the last, the social self which is of significance in further sociological inquiry. Contemporaneously with Durkheim, there were others such as Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl (1900) who shifted their focus from the collective to the individual and concerned themselves with the individual human consciousness. Consciousness largely coincides with mental attitudes derived from a multitude of neural activities taking place within the brain (at least it could be said now with the vantage point of modern neuroscience, although it was not probably a sound line of argument in the days of Brentano and Husserl). Brentano (1874) engaged himself with the task of developing a 'science of the soul', an unfulfilled dream of Aristotle¹⁰. It was this approach that provided impetus to Husserl who concentrated upon the dynamics of human consciousness, the ways in which humans manufacture those 'natural attitudes' about the world 'out there'¹¹. Husserl deserved to be called the 'Father of Phenomenology' for it was he who inspired a whole bunch of thinkers after him who ventured into the domain of

6 It is the opening lines of one of John Donne's poems entitled, 'No Man is an Island'. He was an English poet of the Medieval era (the Elizabethan Age).

7 It was Carl Gustav Jung who coined the term for the first time.

8 It forms one of the basic problems that Kant attempted to solve in all of his philosophical works.

9 William James proposed his three-tier classification in *The Principles of Psychology* published 1890 (New York: Henry Holt), pp. 292-99.

10 Franz Brentano through his expertise on Greek philosophy, especially Plato set out to take forward the incomplete project of Aristotle who wanted to formulate a 'science of the soul'. He propounded his theory in his 1874 book entitled, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.

11 Edmund Husserl expounded his Phenomenology in *Phenomenology and the Crisis in Western Philosophy* originally published in 1936 and *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* originally published in 1913.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

individual behaviour instead of the classical sociological viewpoint that scantily allowed room for the individual in its schema of human society. The school of Symbolic Interactionism spearheaded by Mead¹² and Blumer¹³ further shaped and reshaped the idea of the 'self' in social sciences. The Meadian concept of 'generalized other' seems to be a defining breakthrough in the field. For the first time, there appeared a comprehensive theory that looked to explain the one to many and many to one correspondence of the individual in the society. The individual was no longer an island (an exaltation of Donne's ideas). Nor the society was something abstract beyond the realm of individual consciousness, as explicated by Durkheim. There was a constant flow of energy and information between the individual and the society. However, it was Talcott Parsons who appropriated the concept in his theory of the society. His four-tier classification of the social system was based on this flow of energy and information between the organismic to the cultural system¹⁴.

That being the case, one must ask the question: What is the relevance of the studies on National Character? Is there something within the nation that decides the nature and behaviour of its members? How different is it from the geographical determinism of Franz Boas and others? The environmentalists argue completely in favour of the argument that it is the environment that exerts a decisive influence upon one's ways of living. However, there are sociobiologists and neuroscientists such as Edward Wilson, Eric Kandel and Laurence Tancredi who argue in favour of the 'hardwired behaviour'. Tancredi (2005) whose book carries the same title goes on to show that quite a lot number of human responses that we normally consider as social or moral responses, have their roots hidden deep within the dynamics of molecular biology and protein synthesis through gene coding. There is every possibility that the commonly found human traits like territoriality, altruism and empathy have survived for generations within the human DNA. It could be a misconception to consider them cultural traits. An interesting doubt seems to have been raised by the Israeli sociologist, Joseph Shepher (1983) who seems perplexed at the presence of the universal in the form of 'variation'. It is variability and not similarity that could be taken as universal in the human society. Still there are certain cultural traits and notions with a universal appeal to rope in almost every known human culture. Shepher (1983) developed his argument based upon his study of the idea of 'incest taboo' from a rather theoretical point of view. He confessed that it was almost impossible for him to find a single human society where there was family but no incest taboo. Hence, he went on to search for an answer to the question: Is incest naturally inhibited or culturally prohibited? Those who vote in favour of the first possibility align themselves with the argument of Edward Westermarck called the Westermarck Effect¹⁵. Others who go for the second option belong to the Freudian camp who raised this question against Westermarck's idea: If incest was naturally inhibited and

12 A comprehensive analysis of the 'self' could be found in *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934) by George Herbert Mead.

13 Herbert Blumer who succeeded Mead at the Chicago school looked at the interactionist perspective from a methodological angle. His basis argument were contained in his article, 'What is Wrong with Social Theory?' published in *American Sociological Review* 19 (August, 1954), pp. 146-58.

14 For an in-depth analysis, see Parsons, Talcott. 1951. *The Social System*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.

15 It is called Westermarck Effect proposed by Edward Westermarck based upon his scholarly reasearch published in 1891 for the first time under the title, *The History of Human Marriage*.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

humans do not carry the propensity for it, why is it prohibited in almost every known human culture? The interesting thing to be noted is the fact that neither of the two camps seal the trophy. The reasons behind incest taboo may be partly natural and partly cultural.

The use of these two umbrella terms, 'natural' and 'cultural' makes our job all the more formidable than we would expect. What is natural depends on how we define the term 'nature'. Nature has been defined in millions of ways ever since we learnt to combine the impressions registered through our cognitive faculties and the rational faculty of our brain in order to understand and define the phenomenon that presented itself for scrutiny. Notions about and definitions of nature could be found hidden in the ancient manuscripts of Egyptian and Babylonian civilizations. But the most scintillating description seems to be emanating from the days of ancient Greek civilization. In those days there was a strict division between natural and moral. Add philosophy to them and natural philosophy turned out to be coterminous with what we also call 'physics' whereas moral philosophy was just another name for ethics¹⁶. While the term moral has not fallen into disuse, its connotations have drastically changed. It was heavily loaded with religious, rather theological doctrines that made it a set of precepts, digressing from which would certainly book one's place in the hell. Today, it has been chiselled down in its coercive content and occupies a tiny room in the realm of norms and sanctions, speaking strictly in terms of Sociology. The nature of some terms when one tries to set their historicity seem to undergo massive change, a feature that was brilliantly explained by Michel Foucault (1982) in his book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The very choice of 'madness' as the subject of his Ph.D dissertation was based on his discomfort with the difference in the manner in which madness has been understood in the 17th and 18th century Europe and the manner in which it is understood in our own times. The way in which a phenomenon is perceived largely goes into deciding the human response to it. Hence, Foucault was more concerned with the manner in which madness was sought to be cured and the difference in the medical procedure. Similar is the case with almost every notion, emotions as well. The idea of belonging to a group is also not the same as it was in the ancient times when our ancestors led the life of a hunter-gatherer. While Durkheim (1893) calls it 'mechanical solidarity'¹⁷ and would go down as 'savagery'¹⁸ or at the most 'barbarism' in Morgan's evolutionary scheme of human civilization, the cohesiveness and the psychosocial impact that one is bound to one's group is probably very different from what it means today. LeBon terms it 'herd instinct' which is nothing but the inability of the individual to think and act beyond what is considered to be appropriate in terms of the books on ethics that served as guide to human behaviour, having the sanction of the 'collective conscience' of the group¹⁹. Freud (1921) in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* utilizes the concepts developed by LeBon and Trotter in order to explain the phenomenon of group

16 See Kant, Immanuel. 1788. *The Critique of Practical Reason*.

17 Durkheim coined the term in his Ph.D thesis published in 1893 in English under the title, *Division of Labour in Society*

18 Lewis Henry Morgan proposed his three-stage classification as from savagery to barbarism to civilization in his work, *Ancient Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1877).

19 LeBon's work, *Psychologie des foules* published 1920 was used by Sigmund Freud as the starting ground for formulating his ideas on *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* published 1921.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

behaviour and the 'collective unconscious'. But he seems to look at the army as one of the prime examples of group phenomenon, a lead he picked up from William McDougall. McDougall's seminal work entitled, *The Group Mind* expounds a triple phase beginning with the crowd followed by the Army, culminating in the most recent and the most advanced variety of collective unconscious, the Nation²⁰.

McDougall's account of the group behaviour has the crowd or the unorganised group as its starting point. The crowd is just a collection of individuals peopling a collectivity but devoid of the common bond that holds them together. There could be an element of purpose uniting them temporarily, but there is nothing that comes close to forming a collective unconscious that works as an instrument of permanence. The crowd might behave hypnotically wherein there is a one-to-one correspondence between the hypnotizer and the hypnotized. This is perhaps the reason why Freud invested so much in the concept of the 'leader' who according to him forms the centre point of a collectivity. It is the leader who bears a single-route correspondence with all his followers who get hypnotized by him. If that should be taken to be the flip side of the unorganised group, there is also a flop side having its root in the fact that such correspondence and the hypnosis is ephemeral. As the crowd disperses, all characteristics of a group are lost. Thus, McDougall concerns himself with another kind of group, the Army which is a highly organised form of group phenomenon. The leadership again relies on hypnotic behaviour exhibited by the group, but the process of military socialization that inducts one within the Army causes permanent alteration in their behaviour and constitution. The focus is mostly on disciplining the body. The everyday manners and characteristic behaviour such as greeting one's superior could be identified quite clearly if one belongs to the Army. All other behaviour such as table manners get ingrained within the operational DNA of the members. It becomes a part of their *habitus* through a process that Norbert Elias (1939) explains in his *History of Manners*²¹. It is largely permanent, but lacks universality. Not everyone born and living in a particular region of the world can hope to join the army. What about the civilians? Do they belong to a group? Is family the only group that provides them with the requisite amount of 'we-feeling'? Long before the modern discourse of the family as an institution was formed, there were societies such as that of ancient Sparta where every able citizen was a soldier. Similar was the case with the central Asian tribes led by Genghis Khan. Everybody could live with that feeling of oneness cemented through one's membership in the army. Can these societies be called nations?

A Tryst with Neuroscience

According to Liah Greenfeld (2006), societies of such nature could be clubbed together in the category of '*protonations*' such as Israel, Greece and Rome as they existed in ancient times.²² It is interesting to note her argument that suggests that although there was a nation-like entity

20 The thesis was proposed by William McDougall in his 1920 book, *The Group Mind*.

21 *Habitus* was used in the German academic circles in the early twentieth century. Marcel Mauss used it in French. Elias used it only when writing in German. His English editions replace it with the term, 'personality makeup'.

22 On the protonational character of ancient Israel, Greece, and Rome see H. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), pp. 27–62.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

in the form of these kingdoms, the modern secular form of nationalism was centuries away from crystallizing in the realm of human imagination. The kings were deemed to be some incarnation of the God up there in the sky. Godliness was delegated upon these kings who embodied the divinity, an attribute of God alone. Thus, it was religion and not nationalism that served as the binding force for its denizens. Greenfeld (2006) further argues that the modern nation is an invention of the modern times that could be traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia which was well after Reformation that shook the papal authority in Europe. Hence, 'nationalism' became a corollary of the modern worldview that stood up against a 'theological' explanation of the world. To add some concreteness to her argument, Greenfeld points towards the conflict between religious identity and national identity that the modern society thrusts upon its members. Greenfeld digresses a bit into the field of Neuroscience in the same book entitled, *Nationalism and the Mind*. She brings out the difference between rats and humans on the basis of the genetic coding of the rat's DNA that programs it for the stimulus-response interplay in the environment in which it is supposed to survive. But the human DNA is not preprogrammed. We respond to other's behaviour as well. We live in a complex environment. Hence, we have a symbolic rather than a genetic response to the environment in the form of 'culture' composed of its basic units called 'culturgens' (Lumsden and Wilson 1981)²³. Looking to extract support in favour of her argument from Eric Kandel and Larry Squire's work entitled, *Memory: From Mind to Molecules*, Greenfeld attempts to state that “*culture*, with the help of the *imaginative capacity of the brain*, creates the *mind*.” (Greenfeld 2006:169). The greater emphasis laid by her on *imagination* is due to the fact that it is the region where raw memory is manipulated and ideas take birth. This process when left unchecked gives rise to two things – *agency* or *will* and *identity*. Identity is the subjectivity that comes into play as a result of the consciousness an individual develops in response to locating oneself on the cultural map, similar to the function of the 'place cells' in rats. This consciousness of one's identity is perhaps the bridge between the genetic and natural side led by the DNA and the symbolic or cultural side led by tiny, little units of culture called 'culturgens'. Thus, the crux of her argument lies in her looking at 'culture' as an extension of the biological, rather genetic constitution of the human beings. The identity-forming subjectivity plays a vital role in shaping the configuration of ideas in our mind. Therefrom emanates the ability to form subjective meanings as one understands, rather tries to make sense of one's ontological settings. She emphasizes on the formation of identity due to subjectivity. How true does it seem in the context of nationality being an identity in our present time!

There is another very famous argument that even the evolutionary psychologists and historians have found tough to get rid of. Everything that is learnt seems to be a part of culture and everything that is instinctual or innate represents the nature. Can there be an epigenetic cause that influences the very nature of things and habits learnt, when the very

23 Charles Lumsden and Edward Wilson coined the term in their work, *Genes, Mind and Culture* published in 1981 for the first time.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

essence of the ability to learn is epigenetic in nature? Yet, as Crook²⁴ (1980) aptly puts it (also discussed by Gould and Gould 1981):²⁵

"Studies of the natural constraints on learning suggest that what is learnt, and when, is probably under a genetic surveillance so that learning, does not normally occur outside of an evolutionary stable strategy." (Shepher 1983:11).

The neural activities that guide the processes of learning in humans and other primates are quite similar. Hence, the behaviour of *competition* and *cooperation* shown by some of the primates bears stark similarities with our own society. From sexual behaviour to matters such as organised crime, genocide and rape, one finds everything among other primates. The community feeling among the primates is probably much stronger than ours. Thus, a question must be asked: Are the primates capable of forming and following notions like *Nationalism*? Most of us would be tempted to answer it in the affirmative. Why not? We have strong evidence in support of our argument owing to the fact that from the recent research on primate behaviour conducted by Frans de Waal²⁶ and Robert Sapolsky²⁷, it's clear that a lot of behavioural attributes that we earlier thought to be unique to the humans are found among the primates as well. Something as essential to our living as the art of tool-making is not unique to us. If that is true, can the tools be also wielded as weapons? Suddenly, a doubt arises that compels us to think whether the art of modern warfare fought with sophisticated weaponry could also be accomplished by the primates. Based upon a conjectural evolutionist argument, one has the liberty to favour the primates for an evolutionary pattern that mirrors those of the humans. Historians of human civilization trace its progress from a society of warring tribes to the establishment of the modern idea of nationalism.

In order to understand the nature of nationalism, one needs to distinguish between the kind of functions the concept performs for the social group that believes in it. On the one hand, as expounded by Ramsay Muir²⁸ and others, it is a psychological phenomenon. On the other hand, there are political scientists such as Samuel Huntington who draw their inferences based upon the wider politics of inclusion and exclusion, cooperation and conflict that takes place due to the dialectical nature of nationalism as a concept. Huntington's paradigm of a *cleft* country and a *torn* country tries to bring out the nature of conflict nations face owing to the disillusionment of a certain section of the population that have hitherto lived as one nation.²⁹ It could depend on a number of factors including religion, ethnicity and language.

24 See Crook, John H. *The Evolution of Human Consciousness*. London: Clarendon Press, 1980.

25 Discussed by Gould, J. L. & C. G. Gould in 'The Instinct to Learn' published in *Science* 81 2(4): 44-50.

26 For a detailed analysis of his views, refer to Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2013).

27 For a comprehensive discussion of his ideas see Sapolsky, Robert M. *A Primate's Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

28 Refer Ramsay Muir's *Nationalism and Internationalism* published 1917 in London.

29 Samuel Huntington's paradigm of 'clash of civilizations' revolves around the idea of countries being 'cleft' or 'torn'. He considers Russia and Turkey as torn countries in based on their historical past and Ukraine as a cleft country. For a detailed discussion, see Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon & Schuster. New York.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

We look to analyze three such areas of dialectical relations between the people of a particular geography and the other parts of the nation-state. Discontent owing to religious differences represents the classic example of Kashmir. The issue of ethnicity could be understood from the experience of north-east India. Finally, the fight for a Tamil Ealam that affects both India and Sri Lanka could be one classic example where the rift based on a language gave rise to a high-octane militant nationalism in recent times. As the current discussion aims to focus more upon the linguistic basis of nationalism, a detailed analysis of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict must be the focal point of further discussion.

The special case of Linguistic Nationalism in Sri Lanka

The idea of Tamil nationalism seems to be a special case because it is different from any other conflict that is based on territoriality or religio-ethnic identity. One of the earliest schisms that developed between the Tamil and the Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka has its roots in a linguistic imposition that alienated a significant Tamil minority from the mainstream national life of the country. The 'Sinhala Only' Act of 1956 bade adieu to all other languages but Sinhalese as the official language of Sri Lanka. It did not go down well with the Tamils who had hitherto been equal participants in the struggle for independence in erstwhile Ceylon against the British rule. The move, though garbed in the form of a legal statute, actually seemed to be a 'cultural' ploy of the majoritarian Sinhalese regime to exclude the Tamil minority. The Tamils began to lose their positions in the bureaucracy, in the academia and most importantly in the political arena. They were reduced to a second-grade citizenry in Sri Lanka. The definition of a minority group as put forth by Louis Wirth seems to capture the case of the Tamils in Sri Lanka quite aptly. Wirth defined it as:

“A group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination.” (Wirth 1945:347).

The imposition of the 'Sinhala Only' Act was chiefly a form of 'collective discrimination' against the Tamil population based on cultural characteristics. However, the role of physical characteristics as well as territorial demography of the Tamils could hardly be discounted when taking a full stock of the situation that ensued ever after 1956 in Sri Lanka.

A Historical Account of Sri Lanka

In order to fathom the deep-rooted background of the crisis that fractured the whole idea of a multicultural, multiethnic as well as multilingual nation called Sri Lanka one must maneuver through the footprints of its historical journey that could be traced back to at least the 5th century BC. According to 'Mahavamsa'³⁰, a work by a Buddhist monk in the 6th century AD, the regions what is now known as Sri Lanka welcomed its first inhabitants in the form of Prince Vijaya and his followers who hailed from a place called Simhapura in northern India in about 5th century BC. They established a Sinhalese kingdom and dominated the region for the most part of the next two centuries until the third century BC when there were numerous

30 *Mahavamsa* from the 6th century AD is considered a standard source of Ceylonese history.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

invasions from the neighbouring Tamil kingdoms of southern India such as the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Cheras which considerably shaped the demography of Sri Lanka as it stands today. However, in the popular mythical belief, the Sinhalese people believe that they are descendants of the Aryan migrants from Bengal, of which there is hardly any archaeological evidence. Although there were persistent invasions on the island by the neighbouring Tamils, the embracement of Buddhism by the Sinhalese people took place in the 3rd century BC. However, there was frequent and easy marriage alliances between the royal families of the two regions separated by a small waterbody. Hence, there was a mixing of Tamil blood with Sinhalese blood which could be considered to mark the beginning of the coexistence of the two ethnic groups that were destined to fight a bitter war about 2000 years hence³¹.

A historical schism could be said to have sprouted during the 13th century AD when the old Sinhalese civilization declined and a strong Hindu Tamil kingdom looked to replace it especially in the northern part of Ceylon in the region of the Jaffna peninsula with its capital at Nellur. For the next four centuries, until the end of the 17th century the strength of the Jaffna kingdom was on the rise that was responsible for the crystallization of the 'Sri Lankan Tamil' identity that was definitely different from their ancestors, the mainland Tamil inhabitants. However, the Tamil population of both sides shared the same religion and language. While it is a separate topic of inquiry, the current study seems to focus upon the historical background of the rift that developed between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils in the modern era.

Another watershed era could be said to have begun in 1796 when Ceylon passed into the hands of the British through the East India Company. Since then, the native identity and culture faced severe attacks from the Christian missionary work on the island. Thus, a strong opposition emerged during the nineteenth century in a forked manner with two extrusions – one in the form of Sinhala-Buddhist revivalism, the other striving for Tamil-Hindu revivalism. Although the two movements seem to be anti-colonial, anti-Christian in approach, there was a marked difference between the expanse and efficacy of the two. A comparative study of the two movements suggests that it was the former that had more appeal among the folks of the country. One of the reasons for it could be the larger population of the Sinhala-Buddhist community, but it was not all about numbers. Belief is what propels people in the face of adversity. It could be said with more clarity by borrowing words from Soren Kierkegaard. He said:

“Christian faith requires that faith persists in the face of the impossible, and that humans have the capacity to simultaneously believe in two contradictory things.”³²

Hence, the revivalist movement tried to weave threads of mythology in order to reinforce the belief that the Sinhala-Buddhist civilization is the true saviour of Buddhism as a whole. It was believed by the Sinhala-Buddhist people that Buddha himself thought that Buddhism

31 K. M. de Silva, *A History Of Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981:13).

32 Extracted from <http://www.nobeliefs.com/SomethingToThinkAbout.htm>

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

would be preserved for 5,000 years in Sri Lanka which began as a civilization with the arrival of Prince Vijaya on the island. Thus, Sri Lanka became the land of the Sinhala and also the land of the *Dharma*. The idea gained wide popularity and sought to establish a distinct and dominating Sinhala-Buddhist civilization in Sri Lanka in the 19th century, of course, legitimized by mythological accounts. It could well be seen as promoting a sort of Sinhalese chauvinism in the country that finally resulted in the rise of the 'Sinhala Only' sentiment in the post-Independence Ceylon.

In order to comprehend the issue completely, one must go deep into the process through which the Tamil population inhabited the island in the modern times. It began with the development of some coffee plantations by the British in the Central Highlands sometime around the beginning of the 19th century for which they needed to employ some cheap labour which came to their avail from India. It was largely owing to the migration of plantation labourers from the Tamil regions of India that began in 1818 and continued till 1839 when the Indian government prohibited any such emigration owing to the inhuman condition of indentured labour in all British colonies. However, the ban was lifted in 1847 owing to the assurance given by the British government of Ceylon that the indentured labourers would be entitled for a treatment at par with the local population. What it did was to concentrate the Tamil population in Sri Lanka in certain parts of the country. It was aided by other social, political and legal developments engineered by the British occupation of the territories. The registration of births and deaths was introduced for the first time. The registration of title deeds for land ownership was another novel experiment that Ceylon witnessed in those early years of the 19th century. It resulted in drawing ethnic boundaries in the country with the Sinhalese population being dense in the southern and western parts and the northern and eastern regions having high concentrations of the Hindu Tamil population. Thus, a kind of territorial rivalry took birth on the island which could be well seen as reflected in the Tamil-Hindu revivalist movement that sought to crop up in competition with the rising Sinhala-Buddhist revivalism. Arumuga Navalar was the protagonist of the movement that set out to blend culture, religion and community work in order to give shape to a Tamil national consciousness. The situation, however, gained in complexity owing to the fact that apart from indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils, there was a large number of Tamil population that came as imported labour from Tamil regions of India. Their citizenship rights and living conditions became one of the issues in the political arena after the independence. As long as they inhabited the southern and eastern regions and lived like a ghetto, they did not become a problem for the mainstream politics of Sri Lanka, but due to poor returns from the plantations coupled with apathetic treatment at the hands of the British government, they began to move out of their traditional dwellings in search of greener pastures in the form of trade and employment available in other parts of the country. They faced a formidable opposition from those adhering to a Sinhala-Buddhist identity that wanted to be the sole representative of Sri Lanka.

The early years of the twentieth century saw the rise of a middle class in Sri Lanka similar to the worldwide phenomenon that was taking place both in the West as well as in the colonized

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

regions of the world. There sprang up a number of organisations like Ceylon National Association (CAN), Ceylon Reform League (CRL) and Jaffna Association demanding a larger power and share in governance for the indigenous population. Keeping in view their common goals, CAN and CRL merged in 1917 to form Ceylon National Congress (CNC). As a first concession to the local demands, the British Governor nominated members to the Legislative Council on the basis of ethnicity. While the CNC had a Sri Lankan Tamil as its first President, in its initial years it stood against the idea of representation based on ethnicity. However, in 1920, the Sinhalese groups began campaigning for territorial representation instead of ethnic representation. The minority groups of whom the Tamils formed the largest chunk, favoured the formula of communal representation for they feared that territorial representation might put the numerous Sinhalese people in a commanding position, strong enough to overrule any minority voices. To their distress and as a confirmation of the fears they had in their minds, in the post-Donoughmore reforms of 1931 that envisaged a model of the State Council based on the principle of 'territoriality' and 'universal suffrage', Ceylon elected a State Council in 1936 with 36 Sinhalese and just 7 Tamil members. To add insult to injury, the Council elected an all-Sinhalese Board of Ministers. Obvious fallout of the situation was the mushrooming of a lot of minority rights organisations who thought that their voices might be silenced in the long run if the Sinhalese identity becomes the one and only representative of the country. Two major groups that emerged were the Sinhala Maha Sabha taking care of the majority voices pitted against the All-Ceylon Tamil Conference (ACTC) that strove to foster the Tamil cause. In order to strike a balance between the two antagonistic viewpoints, a formula that was interestingly called the formula of "balanced representation", was put forward by G. G. Ponnambalam. The formula suggested that the Sinhalese community would get half the total number of seats in the Legislature and the rest half would be assigned to the minorities. Hence, it was also called the 50:50 formula. Unfortunately for Ponnambalam, the Governor rejected the formula outrightly.

While tracing the trajectory of the Sri Lankan issue as it has unfolded itself over the years, a mention must be made of the Indian connection in the freedom struggle of Ceylon. The Indian tinge to the larger movement came in 1926 in the form of Ceylon Youth Congress (CYC) formed in Jaffna. It was established by a group of middle class youth, mostly graduates from Indian universities who championed the cause of Ceylonese independence based on the principles of secularism and non-sectarianism. They derived their philosophical support from the ideas of Gandhi and Nehru who had become leaders of eminence on the Indian scene by the late 1920s. Gandhi visited Jaffna in 1927 followed by Nehru in 1932. The organisation looked to propel the idea of equal representation for all. Hence, there were also a number of Sinhalese leaders from the South who were associated with CYC. Nonetheless, the organisation soon lost its sheen and was not very effective in realising its goals. All it contributed to the Ceylonese struggle was to acquaint it with the parallel struggle that was going on in India.

A critical historical appraisal of the conditions prevailing in Ceylon of those times would actually compel us to consider the ideas adopted and propagated by CYC to go a long way in

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

moulding the shape that the political turf of the country took in the years to come. The United National Party (UNP) that was formed in 1947 drew its adherents from all walks of the national life of Ceylon. The Sinhala Maha Sabha that could be seen as a majoritarian right organisation was also a part of the UNP. It envisaged a secular, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual Ceylon at the time of the independence in 1948. There were similarities with the Left parties who also attracted their membership from almost all social groups represented within the newly independent nation. But to the dismay of both UNP and the Left parties, the political environment after 1948 saw the rightist identity-based chauvinism in the ascendancy. There was a suppression of the minorities in a well-planned constitutional manner, especially in the context of the Indian Tamil plantation labourers. They were ridden off their voting rights through the passage of The Citizenship Act of December, 1948 and the Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act of 1949, something they had enjoyed since 1931. The acts came as a reaction to the fact that the first Parliament of 1948 had a proportion of forty percent minorities when they formed just thirty percent of the total population. The acts ensured that the representation of minorities in future parliaments would never exceed twenty percent. Until this moment in Sri Lankan history the discrimination that the Indian Tamils faced had not acquired an ethnic colour. It was more about a sort of class-based discrimination. Hence, the acts faced opposition from left parties only. Surprisingly, most of the Sri Lankan Tamils voted in favour of the acts which was destined to seal the fate of their own ethnically connected brethren. The move could be seen as a precursor to what was to come in the near future. The audacity with which a section of the population which had seven members in the parliament could be disenfranchised was alarming and an act such as the 'Sinhala Only' Act of 1956 could not have been tough for the political pundits of the day to foresee engaged in their act of clairvoyance. The ruling parties could do so with complete impunity with not even the apex court coming in their way. The withdrawal of the voting rights from the Tamil Indian labourers was legally challenged as it was violative of Section 29 of the Soulbury Constitution of 1948. The section imposed restrictions on the legislative powers of the parliament insofar any such legislation "makes persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions are not made liable".³³ When the law courts deliberated upon the issue, they considered it in consonance with another such discriminatory act – Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act, 1949 that imposed very stringent conditions for Indian and Pakistani residents in order to qualify as citizens of the state. The Kegalle District Court delivered a historic verdict rendering the act as unconstitutional as it ran against the spirit of section 29 of the constitution. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court thought otherwise and argued that the act was not applicable to a section of the population, rather it included the entire population of Ceylon within its ambit. Hence, it could not be rendered unconstitutional. The position was also upheld by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. Thus, there was an end to the opposition that the two discriminatory acts faced in the country. It could be seen as paving the way for such legislations in future in the form of the 'Sinhala Only' Act.

33 As quoted in Raj Hoole and others, *The Broken Palmyra*, vol. 1 (Claremont: Harvey Mudd College Press, 1988:2).

The Rift Widens

The beginnings of such sentiments could be traced back to the policy level change in the political programme of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party formed by S. W. R. D. Bandarnayke in 1951. In a sudden turn of events, it showed initial designs for advocating a policy of 'Sinhala Only' that had as its goal to install Sinhalese as the only official language of the country. Until then, both Sinhalese and Tamil enjoyed an equal footing as the official languages of Ceylon. The roots of the problem could be traced back to the introduction of English as the official language after the island went under the control of the East India Company in 1796. The colonial rule, similar to their experiments in India established western institutions of government and politics. Hence, there came into being a civil service of elite nature, a judiciary armed with a modern legal system and an education that served to produce men who would fill the positions in these government jobs. In order to grab the opportunity, the most essential qualification was a simple knowledge of English. Thus, one who was well-versed in English stood a good chance of scaling up through the government echelons to higher ranks. Hence, English became an instrument of social as well as economic mobility in the Ceylonese society of the nineteenth century. A lot of indigenous people showed an upward trend by capitalising upon the opportunities found in plenty.

The change, like every other change, did not receive the same welcome from all parts and every social group of the country. It met with opposition from the Sinhala-Buddhist ethnic groups from the southern regions. Their opposition to the activities of Christian missionaries got an extension in the form of opposing the introduction of English over and above their own Sinhalese language as the official language of the country. Hence, they opposed English education as well resulting in a reduced number of English medium schools in the southern and western parts of Ceylon. On the contrary, the northern regions inhabited largely by the Sri Lankan Tamils saw it as an opportunity to up their stake in the national life of Ceylon. Hence, a large number of English medium schools mushroomed in the North and the East. The consequences were obvious and within a matter of a few years the country saw a large influx of Sri Lankan Tamil into government jobs. Neil De Votta (2004) mentions the fact statistically:

“For example, although they constituted only 11 percent of the country's population, Tamils comprised 33 percent of the civil service and 40 percent of the judicial service just two years prior to independence. They further accounted for 31 percent of the students in the university system. In the medical and engineering fields, Tamil representation numerically equalled that of the Sinhalese.”³⁴

He further traces the trajectory of the issue to the 'Swabhasha Movement' that sought to raise the significance of the indigenous languages such as Sinhalese and Tamil vis-a-vis English in the national life of Ceylon. Based on the numbers of Tamils in government jobs and universities quoted above, deVotta suggests that:

34 See Brown & Ganguly 2003:115.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

“This overrepresentation made the swabasha movement for upper-class and upper-caste Tamils. Thus the movement to replace English with the vernacular languages was mainly Sinhalese-led.”³⁵

It had the long-term impact of according the Sinhalese language a status that was seen as an exaltation of the glorious past of the country and it became something worth fighting for. A detailed discussion could be found in Neil deVotta's book entitled, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*. Excerpts from the book provide us a brilliant vantage point in our attempt to understand the nature and dynamics of the problem. He attempts to outline the genesis of the swabasha movement by confessing the following:

“The Sinhala-only language movement ensued when hitherto politically and economically marginalized Sinhalese forces coalesced to demand preferential treatment from the government.”³⁶

“The initial agitation surrounding the language issue was ... called the swabasha (self-language) movement.”³⁷

The Swabasha Movement included both Sinhalese and Tamil people who waged a battle against English. In deVotta's words:

“The swabasha movement included both Sinhalese and Tamils who campaigned for their respective languages to replace English. It must be recognized that the swabasha movement was not designed to revamp the [colonial] governmental structure. On the contrary, it was an attempt by the hitherto marginalized vernacular speakers to change the criteria by which the opportunities for socioeconomic upward mobility via education and government employment were determined. The proponents of swabasha wanted the rules of the game tweaked so that they too could partake of the spoils.”³⁸

The roots of the problem lay hidden in the fact that the northern regions had better English education, owing to which the Sri Lankan Tamils had acquired most of the government jobs and other positions of profit, disproportionate to their share in the population. De Votta explains it here:

“The excellent English education system instituted by American missionaries in the northern regions had taught many Tamils English. Indeed, by 1930, literacy in English in the Northern Province was second only to Colombo. The paucity of industry and agriculture in the northern regions, the prestige and security stemming from state sector employment, and the opportunity thereby for upward social mobility in the rigidly casteist Tamil society

³⁵See Brown & Ganguly 2003:115-16.

³⁶ See De Votta, Neil 2004:42.

³⁷ See De Votta, Neil 2004:43.

³⁸ For a detailed analysis, refer to Neil De Votta's *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

encouraged many northern Tamils to migrate south seeking a university education and governmental careers. Tamils consequently became heavily overrepresented in the elite Ceylon Civil Service, the judicial service, and higher education.”³⁹

Had it not been for the imbalance, would Ceylon still see a movement akin to the 'swabhasha movement'? No readymade answers seem to be available. However, an important influence on the modern Sinhala-Tamil conflict must be discerned in the swabhasha movement because what it did was to accord a high status to language as the symbol of one's identity worthy of being preserved and fought for. Hence, after the independence, the tide shifted its direction from the battle against English to the battle against Tamil and other vernacular languages spoken by the minorities of Sri Lanka. However, it must be kept in mind that the animosity that cropped up between Sinhalese and the Tamils was not just on the basis of language as identity and symbol. It had its materialist logic as well that took into account the overrepresentation of the Tamils in the public sector which led to a backlash from the Sinhalese people which de Votta describes quite lucidly:

“Sinhalese nationalists, apparently agitated over the Tamils being overrepresented in the coveted civil service, began to adopt a communalist posture and demanded that swabasha mean Sinhala-only. This demand was the first real indication that the informal rules governing Sinhalese-Tamil coexistence could be undermined ... What is important to recognize is that the socio-economic structures that encouraged government employment, given the security and prestige such employment afforded during an era of economic scarcity, were a major reason for the call for Sinhala-only.”⁴⁰

“In resorting to chauvinistic rhetoric, Bandaranaike was well assisted by numerous lay Buddhists and activist Bhikkus, who together organized emotive and impressive processions demanding a Sinhala-only policy. Such bhikkus anathematized the Tamils as "parasites," argued that linguistic parity was undemocratic and unjust, since 80 percent of Ceylonese spoke Sinhala, and claimed that the failure to institute a Sinhala-only policy "would be the death-knell of the Sinhalese". These monks evidenced no desire for compromise and instead suggested that Sri Lanka was for the Sinhalese only. For example, one leading monk thundered: "The Dravidians want parity or Tamilnad. We will give them neither. This country belongs to the Sinhalese. We can't give even an inch of it to the Tamils." Other monks claimed that not just Sinhala but Buddhism too would disappear if parity was instituted.”⁴¹

It is important to note that while the battle seems to be on a linguistic basis, in the appeal to preserve it and unite their cadres the Sinhalese made constant reference to their Buddhist identity. Hence, one could find interplay between various identities while trying to forge the

³⁹ See De Votta, Neil 2004:46.

⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis, refer to Neil De Votta's *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁴¹ For a detailed analysis, refer to Neil De Votta's *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

idea of one nationality. It is also interesting to note that the concept of 'pseudospeciation' as expounded by Erik Erikson in 1966 was employed by the Sinhalese in order to wage the war against the Tamils⁴². They called the Tamils 'parasites', a parallel for which could only be found in the Rwandan conflict when the Hutus and Tutsis who had cohabited the country for hundreds of years suddenly began to see each other as different species altogether and the Tutsis were given the pseudonym of 'cockroach' by the Hutus. It is a kind of practice that actually relieves one of the guilt that accompanies every act of cruelty among human beings. It is because we have empathy both for our own species as well as for creatures of other species. The moment we consider a particular group as inimical to our own group, we look at it as a 'pseudospecies' and harming does not instill any feeling of guilt whatsoever. Something similar happened between the Sinhalese and Tamils before the civil war broke out in Sri Lanka in 1983.⁴³ The aftermath of the Sinhala Only policy was predicted by Suntharalingam from a rather pragmatic point of view, as explained by de Votta in the following words:

“It was obvious that a Sinhala-only policy would have a radical effect on minorities' future employability, especially in the state sector. With the bill's passage, Suntharalingam complained, "the Sinhalese would hold all jobs from top to bottom and the Tamils would hold the scavenging and latrine coolie jobs.”⁴⁴

Another important observation comes from Michael Edward Brown and Sumit Ganguly in their book, *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*. They talk particularly in the context of the Sinhala-Only Act of 1956. In the introductory section of the book, they reveal the crux of their side of the story:

“The passage of the Sinhala-Only Act of 1956 was a turning point in Sinhalese-Tamil relations. Tamil grievances subsequently grew because, in Sri Lanka as elsewhere, language policies had wide-ranging implications for educational and economic opportunities. By the 1970s many Tamil youth had become both radicalized and militarized.”⁴⁵

The argument receives further reinforcement by a scholarly article contributed by Neil de Votta which forms the fourth chapter of the book entitled, 'Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka'. De Votta tries to delve deep into the issue and looks at it from a historical point of view that takes into account the 2000-year old history of the island, of which the ancient text, *Mahavamsa* is considered to be an important source. In the opening paragraphs of the chapter he writes in the context of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict:

Both groups, in the main, enjoyed cordial relations for more than 2,000 years. Then, in the 1950s the Sinhalese abandoned the movement to make both Sinhala and Tamil the country's official language and instead instituted Sinhala as its sole official language. The Sinhala-Only Act of 1956 led to ethnic riots in that year and in 1958, marking the beginning

⁴² 'Pseudospeciation' is a concept given by Erik Erikson in 1966.

⁴³ The Civil War in Sri Lanka broke on 23rd July, 1983.

⁴⁴ See De Votta, Neil 2004:86.

⁴⁵ See Brown & Ganguly 2003:11.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

of acute Sinhalese-Tamil animosity. The manner in which the Sinhala-Only Act and Sinhalese linguistic nationalism facilitated violent conflict, however, has not been fully appreciated."⁴⁶

Again, an excerpt from the same chapter of Brown and Ganguly book seems to discuss an important aspect of the issue:

"The Tamil protests that accompanied the passage of the Sinhala-Only Act were unprecedented. When the bill was introduced on June 5, 1956, the Tamil Federal Party organized a satyagraha (peaceful protest) outside the parliament building. The Tamil protest was met by a counterprotest organized by the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna. A mob representing the latter attacked the Tamil protesters and was responsible for unleashing riots that killed nearly 150 Tamils...Tamil leaders characterized the Sinhala-Only Act as a form of "apartheid.""⁴⁷

The Romantic Idea of Sinhalese Nationalism

One of the main reasons that served as the justification for the campaign in favour of the Sinhala Only policy is rather sentimental than rational. Some of them opined that the Sinhala people had to fight for winning the status of the official language of the country for their language for 140 years since the British replaced it with English in 1815⁴⁸. Mendis Rohanadeera also strengthens his argument by stating that except for 53 years from 1017 to 1070 AD when Raja Rata came under Tamil domination Tamil has never been the State language in Sri Lanka⁴⁹. The emotionally charged atmosphere that grew in the post-independence era on the island appears clear in the fact that only the parties representing Tamil interests exclusively voted against the Language Bill in 1956 without managing support even from the non-sectarian, secular-faced UNP. The emotions also represented a kind of fear among the Sinhala people represented in the following words of Jayewardene:

"The great fear I had was that Sinhalese being a language spoken by only 3,000,000 people in the whole world would suffer or may be entirely lost in time to come if Tamil is also placed on an equal footing with it in this country. The influence of Tamil literature, a literature used in India by over 40,000,000 and the influence of Tamil literature and Tamil culture in the country, I thought, might be detrimental to the future of the Sinhalese language."⁵⁰

Jayewardene was not the only one in holding these apprehensions. Similar concerns were aired by Dr. Colvin R de Silva. Addressing the Constituent Assembly of Sri Lanka in 1971, he said:

⁴⁶ See Brown & Ganguly 2003:105.

⁴⁷ See Brown & Ganguly 2003:124.

⁴⁸ See Prof Mendis Rohanadeera, *Sinhalaya Yali Rajaviya - Eya Keseda Yath* . 2007:1

⁴⁹ See Prof Mendis Rohanadeera, *Sinhalaya Yali Rajaviya - Eya Keseda Yath* . 2007:27.

⁵⁰ See Prof K.M de Silva and Howard R Wriggins: *J R Jayewardene of Sri Lanka*. 1988:220.

Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

"This is a small country..... The damage that could result in dividing into small units is demonstrated in our history. Whenever State in Sri Lanka was divided into parts and sub kings were appointed to them under the control of one emperor, enemies here and abroad exploited the situation to put one against the other. The final result of such hostile strategies was the loss of our freedom to foreigners. The people of this country know this and I do not believe they would be prepared even for a moment to do away with the unitary character of this country.⁵¹

Another explanation of the linguistic turn in the politics of Sri Lanka comes from Dr. Susantha Goonatilake who considers it a part of the normal sequence of events in the post-colonial period of most of the countries. He cites the example of India where Hindi was made the official language after the independence with other languages such as Tamil also receiving the allied status as one of the official languages of India⁵². He looks back at the background of the divisive politics that had loitered around in the history of the island for quite a long time. He considers two examples to be representative of the factional sentiments dominant within the national life of Ceylon - the 50:50 formula suggested by G. G. Ponnambalam and the demand for a separate Tamil state by the Chelvanayagam Declaration of 1941⁵³.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thus, no matter what the genesis and causes of the schism were, the consequences could be seen as both positive and negative. The negative ones are the most observed and discussed. The ethnic riots that ensued were of the most nightmarish nature, especially the riots of 1958. In the post-1972 era, the struggle continued with the final launch of an armed struggle by the Tamil Tigers in 1983. It resulted in the Sri Lankan Civil War which was fought between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE for just over a quarter of a century until the government could register a decisive victory in 2009. However, in order to placate the Tamil anger, Tamil was also accorded the status of the State language in 1987. But to their dismay, the civil war that had already gathered momentum continued. While that's the oft-discussed and popular side of the story, there were other consequences due to the Sinhala Only policy. As a natural consequence after the passage of the 1956 Act, Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Pirivenas were made universities in 1957. It opened up the opportunity for thousands of students who had been left out due to the elite nature of the university education that provided education in English alone. A large number of *Bhikkhus* who had attained education in Oriental languages finally gained access to these Pirivenas and therefrom emerged a plethora of opportunities for those who belonged to the common folk. They could become a part of the civil service and other elite positions in the government, thus putting an end to the imperial rule of the English language in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgments

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

51 Proceedings of the Constituent Assembly March 15, 1971.

52 See Dr. Susantha Goonatilake, *Recolonisation - Foreign Funded NGOs in Sri Lanka*, 2006:81.

53 See Dr. Susantha Goonatilake, *Recolonisation - Foreign Funded NGOs in Sri Lanka*, 2006:86.

Conflict of Interests: The author declared no conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

- Brentano, Franz. [1874] 1995. *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. London: Routledge.
- Brown, Michael Edward and Sumit Ganguly. 2003. *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- De Silva, K. M. 1981. *A History Of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- De Silva, K.M. and Howard Wriggins. *J.R.Jayewardene of Sri Lanka*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.
- De Votta, Neil. 2004. *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- De Waal, Frans. 2013. *The Bonobo and the Atheist*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Durkheim, Emile, [1895] 1938 (1895). *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: The Free Press.
- Elias, Norbert. [1969] 2000. *The Civilizing Process*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New Jersey: Blackwell Publishers.
- Engels, Friedrich. 1909. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company.
- Foucault, Michel. [1982] 2002. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Goonatilake, Susantha. 2006. *Recolonisation - Foreign Funded NGOs in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Sage India.
- Greenfeld, Liah. 2006. *Nationalism and the Mind*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Huntington, Samuel. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- James, William. 1890. *The Principles of Psychology*. Henry Holt. New York.
- Kant, Immanuel. [1781] 2007. *Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Kant, Immanuel. [1788] 2004 (1788). *Critique of Practical Reason*. New York: Dover Publications.
- McDougall, William. 1920. *The Group Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self and Society*. Edited by C. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1951. *The Social System*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Popper, Karl. 1957. *The Poverty of Historicism*. Boston: The Beacon Press.
- Rohanadeera, Mendis. 2007. *Sinhalaya Yali Rajaviya - Eya Keseda Yath*. Dept. Of Cultural Affairs. Government of Sri Lanka.
- Sapolsky, Robert M. 2001. *A Primate's Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Shepher, Joseph. 1983. *Incest: A Biosocial View*. New York: Academic Press.
- Tancredi, Laurence M. 2005. *Hardwired Behavior*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Westermarck, Edward. 1901. *The History of Human Marriage*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. [1921] 2001 (1921). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge Classics.

How to cite this article: Pathak A (2017), Nationalism as a Mental Construct: The Linguistic Basis of the Sinhala-Tamil Conflict, *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, Volume 4, (3), DIP:18.01.137/20170403, DOI:10.25215/0403.137