

FORMATION OF ETHNOCENTRISM AND THE PERPETUATION OF HATRED: THE ROLE OF SOCIALIZATION AND MEDIA IN THE SRI LANKAN ETHNIC CONFLICT¹

SASANKA PERERA

“— Collective perceptions, especially in an emotionally tense and ideologically charged atmosphere, tend to reconstruct social reality. They add substance, colour and tonality obtained from the deeply ingrained mytho-ideological currents associated with the discourses that run parallel to various social interests—”

(Gunasinghe 1987:61-62)

Introduction: Problems of Restricted Information and Dynamics of Ethnocentrism

The Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, a 20th century phenomenon involving the country's Sinhala majority and Tamil minority surfaced after independence in 1948 in the context of ethnic politics that became the dominant form of political activity. The problem reached civil war proportions in the 1980s and culminated in the military intervention of Indian armed forces in the late 1980s. Today, this conflict still continues unabated despite some minor changes in the dynamics of Sinhala-Tamil relations.

The purpose of this paper is to make a limited attempt to place in context the role played by socialization and media in constructing attitudes which contributed to or justified the ethnic conflict and its militarization. More specifically, this study is focussed on how these processes influenced contemporary (1988) Sinhala society. In the brief analysis that follows, particular attention is paid to the influence of the family, the role of the news media, and the influence of mass-circulating books. Part of the study will depend on interviews. In terms of a series of exploratory interviews it seemed possible to group most Sinhalas into two categories depending on the manner in which they viewed the ethnic conflict. These attitudes, some of which will be discussed in detail later, can be termed *unsympathetic* and *moderately sympathetic*. To properly understand the role played by the media and socialization in promoting or justifying the conflict, one needs to understand the nature of ethnocentrism, and the relative unavailability of critical information about Sri Lankans themselves and what they consider as their past. Within this context I would argue that socialization and media have played a negative role in the Sri Lankan conflict.

¹ Data for this paper was collected from the Western, Central and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka during 1988. Data collection primarily involved participant observation and interviews.

In a sense ethnocentrism is a normal human tendency. But clearly, extreme and unchecked forms of ethnocentrism can have negative consequences, particularly when placed in the context of constantly biased media activity and negative socialization. On the other hand ethnocentrism itself is a social and cultural construction influenced by inter-generational socialization. In a sense one specific product of socialization is ethnocentrism. In a multi-ethnic society such consequences could lead to the genesis of an intolerant polity.

From the outset of this paper I would suggest that the conflict in Sri Lanka is more the result of inappropriate and wrong perceptions than firm realities. These perceptions are based on misinformation and a lack of understanding of the major ethnic and religious groups in the country. The locally available information, written in either Sinhala or Tamil is mostly biased accounts of "history", steeped in myth, legend, and more importantly polemical interpretations of what is considered history. On the other hand myths themselves (which relate to ethnic and religious identities) which also constitute information and part of the collective consciousness are also susceptible to polemical interpretations in the current atmosphere.

The critical evaluations of Sri Lankan history, the evolution of ethnic and religious identities, and the dynamics of Sinhala-Tamil relations are, for the most part unavailable to Sri Lankans. The critical evaluations dealing with such issues, whether authored by Sri Lankan or foreign scholars are published in English in the West, and most Sri Lankans generally do not have access to these.³ Similarly, academic or semi-academic discussions dealing with these issues held in Sri Lanka (or elsewhere) are usually conducted in English. Moreover, participation in such events is also restricted.

Generally, not even summarized Sinhala (or Tamil) versions of these discussions are accessible to most people through the news-media or journals. In the event that they do appear in the Sinhala press, the likelihood is that they would be differentially and polemically interpreted versions of what had actually transpired. Eventually it is to such polemical versions that the general public would have easy access.

Thus the socialization process in the wider society, and the attitudes it creates are ultimately dependant on sources and availability of information or the lack thereof. This is especially significant where attitudes relevant to ethno-religious identities and inter-ethnic relations are concerned. In addition to the

³ Besides, some of these expatriate literature are themselves rather dubious, which sometimes suggest that the Sinhalese are predisposed to violence. The best example of this type of literature is Bruce Kapferer's extremely problematic book *Legends of People Myths of State*. In this book Kapferer depicts Sinhala violence as a kind of giant exorcism, a natural extension of Sinhala spiritual beliefs and ritual practices. Such assumptions are not only erroneous, but also too simplistic.

restrictions on information identified above, the problem also has to be understood in the context of the national security state Sri Lanka has become, where the free flow of information is restricted by state intervention as well. Where there is a lack of information or restrictions are imposed upon available information, people tend to rely more on uncritical and harmful sources like rumors. In Sri Lanka where censorship of news is an accepted way of life, people are prone to accept rumors without critical evaluation. In July 1983 the anti-Tamil riots were intensified on the second day as the result of an unsubstantiated rumour that Tamil guerrillas were attacking the city of Colombo. What is ultimately important is not the source or validity of information received, but the perceptions created and action undertaken on the basis of whatever information that is available. As W.I. Thomas has pointed out, irrespective of a social situation being real or unreal, if people define it to be real, the social consequences of that definition are likely to be real (quoted in Gunasinghe 1987: 61).

The formation of unsympathetic attitudes towards Tamils through socialization takes place within the above framework. As a result of misunderstood and misinterpreted history and ethnic politics, Tamils have traditionally been perceived by Sinhalese as traitors, invaders, aliens and job grabbers, which are all important markers of Sinhalese ethnocentrism. The information and perceptions about Tamils floating around in the Sinhalese society have been negative under the best of circumstances. This situation has deteriorated further with the increase of Tamil militancy and violence against both the state and Sinhalese civilians. Today, many aspects of the Sinhalese socialization process not only perpetuate negative images of Tamils but also specifically advocate their destruction.

Basic Parameters of Socialization

As an important arena of socialization the ethnically segregated structural organization of Sri Lankan schools play a significant role in constructing and maintaining perceptions and attitudes detrimental to tension-free inter-ethnic relations. But such a school-oriented process would lose its legitimacy and effectiveness if it functioned in isolation to the larger society where the education establishment is located. Attitudes and values constructed by schools, whether negative or positive can be properly implanted in young minds only if the larger society recognizes and imitates these attitudes and values. Therefore the socialization process in schools, in the larger society and the influence of the media are integral parts of a cyclical process which constructs negative perceptions detrimental to inter-ethnic relations. That is, attitudes and values acquired in schools are reinforced in the larger society, and vice versa.

Before proceeding with this analysis one pertinent point must be clarified. Conventional academic wisdom in some Sri Lankan quarters and elsewhere holds that unfavorable attitudes towards Tamils is the result of increasing Sinhala Buddhist militancy. While accepting that Sinhala Buddhist militancy has played a major role in intensifying the ethnic conflict, one does not necessarily have to be a Buddhist to harbor anti Tamil feelings. A Sri Lankan academic in 1986 stated in a personal communication that a significant number of Sinhala Catholics had taken part in the anti-Tamil violence of July 1983. My own experience at the July 1983 incidents and interviews conducted later showed that religious differences among the Sinhalas had no significant bearing upon riot participation against Tamil targets. When harboring overt anti-Tamil feelings Sinhala-Christian households in my current sample were not particularly different from Buddhist households. Both Sinhala-Buddhist and Christian parents expressing unsympathetic attitudes towards Tamils stressed that the country belonged to the Sinhalas, and that no one else had any real right to it. Quoting from Sri Lankan history (especially the wars against invading South Indians) was a frequent means of legitimizing these assertions. While Buddhist parents tended to stress the Buddhist nature of these ancient conflicts and nationalist inspirations, Christian parents stressed the "*Sinhalaness*" of those episodes, avoiding any Buddhist connotations. Whatever conflicts and competitions there are between Sinhala Christians and Buddhists, when it comes to matters of ethnic identity, nationalism and what they consider patriotism, their religious affiliations become irrelevant to a large extent.

Unsympathetic attitudes are also closely related to the definition of Sinhala identity. In a broad sense many Sinhalas today would say that to be Sinhala means to be of North Indian and Aryan descent, the masters of Sri Lanka and protectors of Buddhism. In the case of students, many of these attitudes are picked up in schools. But before students come under the negative influence of segregated schools such attitudes would already have been inculcated in some form in the wider society. For example, consider the case of a group of five-year-old children in a kindergarten school run by a Catholic organization in the Colombo suburb of Mabile. The children were all Sinhalas. However, according to school administrators they were given instruction in an environment of ethnic and religious tolerance where teachers talked about other religious and ethnic groups in a positive light. These same children enthusiastically sang songs to the same effect on a regular basis under the guidance of their teachers. But when a popular fancy dress parade was organized, none of the children wanted to dress as characters typically associated with Tamils. Such an inherent revulsion must have come from home in particular and societal socialization in general, since the school environment was designed to inhibit such attitudes.

Some of the primary sources of early socialization of attitudes of ethnic superiority are parents, kin, domestic helpers and others associated with the nurturing of a child. Most Sinhala children are brought up with stories of King Dutugemunu⁴ and the constant reminders that they should emulate the hero king. In the context of biased and polemical interpretation of Sinhala myth and historiography, such an emulation invariably suggests the destruction of Tamils, and the notion that it is justified. As interviews with many students have indicated (including some six and seven year olds), heroic attributes were not generally identified with characters closely associated with a particular religion, but with those who had perceivably expressed notions of ethnic superiority, Sinhala patriotism and violence towards Tamils. Under most circumstances, children form rudimentary and symbolic notions of ethnic exclusivity and intolerance of Tamils even before they commence formal education. Much of this socialization initially comes from their parents, grandparents, close kin and domestic helpers. My own personal recollection is that I learnt most of these stories from my father's aunt who lived with my family.

The first time I heard of a critical analysis of some of these myths I was already a second year undergraduate trying desperately to understand who was lying-- my kin or the social scientists who came up with the contemporary analyses. In reality no one was lying. The social scientists were practicing their craft, and my kin were simply transmitting knowledge they themselves had acquired through socialization.

Many parents and kin recite ethnically-suggestive stories to put children to sleep, make them eat, as rewards for good deeds or as threats to demand obedience. The pre-school societal socialization makes the formal negative socialization of schools relatively easier as the students are already familiar with the explicit notions expressed in textbooks and by teachers. The information shared and the parental attitudes expressed at informal discussions have a direct correlation with the attitudes of children. If parental attitudes are unsympathetic, almost always the children of those parents express similar attitudes, further internalize them in schools and transmit them to peers. It is very seldom that schools help to moderate unsympathetic attitudes picked up from parents or society at large. In general when this happens it is not the work of the school as an institution but the work of a few exceptional teachers.

Socialization of Unsympathetic Students

Initially, I interviewed 50 Sinhala students from Colombo, Kandy and Galle districts to ascertain their general views and attitudes regarding ethnic conflict and Tamils. As already mentioned these attitudes could be broadly grouped into

⁴ Dutugemunu is the pre-eminent culture hero of the Sinhalas whose heroism is defined in terms of the wars he is supposed to have fought against Tamils.

two categories--unsympathetic and moderately sympathetic. Those who belonged to the unsympathetic category were the majority and expressed the following sentiments (among others):

- 1) Tamils are traitors and do not belong in Sri Lanka.
- 2) Tamils are a privileged group who are economically better off than the Sinhallas, and consequently lack any real basis for grievances.
- 3) Tamils should not be given additional concessions beyond those they already have.
- 4) Further, the ethnic conflict must be solved militarily.

The clear minority who belonged to the moderately sympathetic category expressed the following sentiments (among others):

- 1) Tamils **probably** have genuine grievances which should be looked into.
- 2) Except for estate workers, who are migrant laborers, other Tamils have a right to live in Sri Lanka, but they should cooperate with the Sinhallas instead of always fighting for their rights (A significant proportion of this group viewed the estate population in a negative light, but not all).
- 3) Teaching both Tamil and Sinhala in schools might be a good idea.
- 4) A military solution to the ethnic conflict should be opted for only after all political solutions have failed or military and political action must be carried out simultaneously.

Moderate sympathizers were an insignificant minority of those interviewed. The two categories of attitudes were not fundamentally different except in temperament. In the case of the moderate sympathizers the sobering affect was the result of parental attitudes. Most children who expressed moderately sympathetic attitudes typically had a mixed parentage, unusually tolerant parents or parents who were involved in leftist politics. Since this group constitutes a clear minority whose influence is negligible, I decided to analyze the socialization process of ten students (10/50) who expressed *unsympathetic* attitudes. To avoid repetition I will produce a composite summary of the processes which tend to influence this group by focussing on specific incidents, narratives and activities. Of the ten students, seven had Buddhist and three had

Christian family backgrounds. The ten households in the unsympathetic category shared the following activities in common:

- 1) Listening to the news on state-controlled radio, and watching the late-night news on state TV.
- 2) Reading *Dinamina* and the *Daily News* (state-controlled newspapers which are predictably state-centric and Sinhala-centric) or *Divayina* and the *Island* (which are not necessarily state-centric, but *Divayina* is clearly Sinhala-centric while the *Island* is not always so).
- 3) Discussing some aspect of current politics, especially over dinner (mostly because this is the only meal the entire family can partake as a group).

These activities are closely associated with and are inter-related with the following sources of information:

- 1) Information from the work-place, school, kin, domestic helpers and peers.
- 2) Information from the media--newspapers, radio, television, drama and books.
- 3) Information from places of religious worship.

The socialization process which influences how the Sinhala perceive Tamils is profoundly dictated by the activities and sources of information outlined above. During 1988 (the period of field research) and immediately prior to that, the major focus of people's discussions on current politics were based on the ethnic conflict. In 1987 Indian armed forces occupied northern and eastern Sri Lanka, and the JVP began a devastating series of attacks beginning in mid-1988. All these formed dynamic discussion topics. Whatever the topics of discussion, the sources of information remained relatively consistent. In discussions directly or indirectly dealing with the ethnic conflict, nearly half the information came from people's work-places, schools, kin and peer groups (friends), while an equal number came from the media. Some information also came from places of worship, clergy, and the origin of some information could not be conclusively traced.⁵

Whatever the sources of information and their validity, most information received helped to harden the already negative image of Tamils. Consider some examples. Early in 1988 I asked a family at their dinner table whether the newspapers had recently reported any massacres in the north or east. There was a torrent of information. I was told that "*newspapers cannot be trusted these days*

⁵ For this analysis I used the same sample of ten families identified earlier.

because the government censors news reports on massacres of Sinhalas to make sure that the Sinhalas do not get angry and take the law into their own hands.” Most information was allegedly received from colleagues at the work-place who had “some contacts in the trouble spots”, or from kin or friends in the armed forces. I was able to corroborate some of these accounts from other reliable sources. Even though the head of the family claimed that “newspapers cannot be trusted,” most of the stories related to me were reported in the Sinhala press (especially in *Divayina*), and the family had regular access to these papers. So it was difficult to establish if the origin of some of these stories were “trusted friends” or “untrustworthy newspapers”. The outpouring of anger at the needless killing of thousands of fellow Sinhalas was quite understandable. Significantly, the killings of Tamils carried out by the security forces were routinely justified as revenge or a consequence of war. In many interviews two similar sentiments were expressed regarding the future of the Sinhalas:

“At this rate of killing, Sinhala Buddhists will become a minority or even extinct”. (expressed by Sinhala Buddhists)

“At this rate of killing the Sinhalas would become a minority or extinct.” (expressed by the majority of those interviewed including Sinhala Christians)

The future of the Sinhalas was a concern for most people and was regularly expressed as stated above. This was the result of hearing or reading of massacres of Sinhalas in the east and north central provinces. Tamils as an ethnic group are held responsible for this state of affairs. Often many Sinhalas (especially the unsympathetic ones) do not differentiate between Tamil militants who carried out brutal attacks and, Tamil civilians who did not. To them the culprits are simply “demalu” (an impolite term for Tamils) or “koti” (tigers). The emerging lack of conceptual differentiation between these two categories in general usage is the direct result of socialization and media. Increased ethnic conflict and brutal attacks on Sinhala civilians and the political compulsions resulting from these processes have made the distinction between Tamils and guerillas irrelevant in the minds of the socializers, and the average Sinhalas. This logic has made many Sinhalas routinely justify repressive military action which has maimed, killed and displaced thousands of Tamil civilians. Here we are faced with a contradiction in terms of Buddhist ethics and common sense; it is barbaric for Tamil guerillas to kill defenseless Sinhala civilians, but it is not barbaric and even heroic for the military to massacre Tamil civilians in the guise of anti-terrorist operations.⁶ One head of a (Buddhist) household who recounted

⁶ A similar situation existed among Tamils. For those who were tired of military action, the violence perpetrated by guerillas against Sinhala civilians seemed justified.

many stories of massacres of Sinhala peasants was genuinely grieving and angry about the incidents. He made the following statement in the same conversation:

"One of my friends in the army told me that when they move through a village in the north not even a cat is left alive. That is the way these Tamils should be treated."

The cue was immediately taken up by two of the family's three children (boys) who related stories of similar military operations and perceived heroism of soldiers. The obvious brutality of these operations did not seem to effect the family. Despite their acknowledged religiousness, neither the parents nor the children made any attempts to restrain themselves or sympathize with Tamil victims. However, in many such interviews it was common to hear people making mechanical apologies with expressions like:

"Do not think I am inhuman"

"Do not think I am a devil, but these things must be said."

"It is too bad so many Tamils are dying, but they asked for it."

"I have many Tamil friends, but in a national emergency such as this I cannot sympathize with them".

Most of these attitudes are initially expressed by parents and transmitted to their children. The contemporary socialization process in Sinhala society seems to have subverted the component for "rational" thinking in people's cognitive process, and replaced it with an emotive component when discussing issues such as ethnicity and conflict. This change has even influenced adults who attended non-segregated schools in an era free of regular conflicts with Tamils. A number of parents expressing unsympathetic views belonged to this category and regularly interacted with Tamils in their professions. They do not consider the lack of conflict in their youth as a result of the socio-economic realities of the time. Instead they project the problems of today to the past. Hence many of them tell their children that even though they *"did not experience many of today's problems, the Tamils have always been selfish and ungrateful and the brutal militancy is hardly surprising."* Such sentiments were clearly expressed by the parents of three unsympathetic families interviewed. These types of sentiments have a profound influence on their children who attend segregated schools, live in a mostly segregated society, have very limited if any personal contact with Tamils and have grown up in a society where ethnic politics have become a way of life. For them Tamils have always been a *"problem"*.

As far as Buddhists are concerned another process may also be at work. In the context of the post 19th century middle-class sponsored rationalization of Buddhism, and the modernization of education an important component of Buddhist socialization, such as *jataka* stories has been marginalized. Most central Buddhist ideals were transmitted through *jatakas* and not through the detailed analysis of Buddhist discourse. The marginalization of such an important part of socialization may have serious social consequences that we have not yet attempted to understand.

The cumulative effects of these circumstances had reached a dangerous height even in 1981 when the Tamil militancy was still in its infancy. Consider the following example. In June 1981 the Jaffna Public Library was burned by thugs purportedly employed by prominent Sinhala politicians from Colombo as the security forces looked on. Among other things, the library contained priceless manuscripts pertaining to the history of Tamils in Jaffna. Its burning was a profoundly symbolic act which seemed to suggest the desire of the Sinhalas to wipe out all traces of Tamils from the country. Many Tamils considered it an overt act of "*cultural genocide*". The government did nothing to bring those responsible to justice even though a few newspapers and some Sinhala organizations did register their outrage.

But in many cases, the private expressions of feelings regarding the matter were profoundly different from the public expressions. Everybody knew that the burning of the library was wrong. But when Tamil students were collecting donations at the University of Colombo to rebuild the Jaffna library, remarks made by Sinhala undergraduates were extremely insensitive. Very few as far as I could ascertain refused donations outright. Many made minimal donations as they said later "*it was embarrassing not to do so!*" It was not an expression of sympathy, but merely a mechanical social obligation to avoid shame or embarrassment. Statements made by a number of students were very enlightening:

"They demand half of our country and now come to us asking for money".

"They always stick together and never even talk to us; now when they want money they come to us."

"So their library was burnt. It was their fault. Why should we pay for that?"

Each of these statements testify to not only the hardened attitudes of the average Sinhalas, but their total misconception of contemporary politics as well as their inability to assess the unfolding crisis in its proper socio-political

context. Tamil students are blamed for asking for money while demanding the division of the country. These students probably did not have much to do with the separatist movement. But in the eyes of the Sinhalas they are separatists or terrorists and are blamed for trying to divide the country, while it is never questioned why such a demand was made in the first place. Despite the availability of public knowledge indicating who was responsible for the burning of the library, the whole episode was simply dismissed as "*their fault*". The symbolic significance of the incident was never even considered. Many Sinhala students also complained bitterly that Tamil students never talk to them unless they need money or some other favor. It is never realized that lack of communication is the result of the legacy of segregated education. The blanket logic blaming Tamils for all undesirable political acts has been extended to cover situations even when the victims are Tamils themselves. These hardened attitudes are a direct result of negative socialization.

The Influence of the Media

The media in general also has a profound influence in the process of negative socialization, and the role it plays would have become apparent in the discussion so far. Media includes news media on one hand and popular songs, drama, movies, and literature on the other. The fact that nearly 80% of the Sri Lankan population is literate in at least one of three languages must be borne in mind as this has increased people's accessibility to a variety of published sources of information. On the average people are quite pessimistic about their sources of information in so far as the media is concerned. Sri Lankan television and radio are commonly referred to as "*pacha sanstha*" or institutions of lies. When it comes to news which does not deal with the ethnic issue or anti-terrorist activities, this sense of pessimism is retained, and news is treated with caution, often expressing sentiments like "*these things must be taken with a pinch of salt*". But when it comes to news regarding the ethnic issue or associated military activities, there is a remarkable consistency in the manner in which it is internalized without much analysis. In the event of analysis, even the most outrageous actions reported are routinely justified.

In 1984 the northern coastal town of Velvetiturai was heavily shelled by the Sri Lankan navy, causing severe structural damage to the town as well as many civilian casualties. The government became defensive when the destructive operation was reported on the BBC. The Minister of National Security appeared on national television and displayed some aerial photographs of Velvetiturai, stating that the shelling did not take place because the Sri Lankan navy did not have gunboats fitted with cannons. The only "evidence" was the minister's words and the photographs. But the photos were too indistinct to visualize any structural damages. Alternatively, they could have been from some other coastal town or from Velvetiturai before it was shelled. Many people who normally do

not take the minister seriously accepted his explanation. On the other hand a vast majority had no reliable sources among the victims to verify the incident (and others like it), due to lack of contact with people of the north and east. Those who accepted that the operation probably did take place justified it as a necessary action in counter-insurgency operations.

Clearly, people's rationale for analyzing information is restricted by their emotional frame of mind. Since Tamils are seen as a destructive force in terms of this emotional frame of mind, whatever violent action perpetrated against Tamils can be tolerated. Hence if the Minister says that a Tamil village was not shelled, it is because it was not shelled. After all, it is the word of a Sinhala person against "*Tamil propaganda*". The idea of Tamil propaganda was extended to cover all unpopular scholarship as well.

There is a clear difference in the way most Sinhalas perceive reports of military action in Tamil areas and the violence unleashed by the JVP, various death squads and the military in the south between 1988 and 1990. Incidents of state-sponsored violence were not reported in the state controlled media, which simply blamed all incidents of violence on the JVP. For private newspapers the most popular phrase to describe all forms of political violence was "*the work of unidentified gunmen*". This kind of information was treated extremely skeptically by the Sinhalas, and some even cultivated the habit of listening to the BBC to obtain "*real news*". Earlier, when the BBC was reporting incidents of military excesses in Tamil areas, many Sinhalas considered it an "*apparatus of Tamil Elam propaganda*". No longer were the violent incidents happening to Tamils alone but also to the Sinhalas at the hands of state agents and a Sinhala militant group. In this context the emotive mass conscience of the Sinhalas did not allow them to internalize uncritical local news reports without scrutinizing them. More importantly, there were a number of sources through which they could verify information, which they could not and did not have the emotional need to do in the case of Tamils. Even with this sobering tendency in the way news was internalized, there is no visible sign that news from the north or east is scrutinized in the same manner.

The illustrations above indicate how mechanisms of pre-conceived preferences and biases function in the process of rejecting or internalizing information. Let us consider how internalized information help create perceptions unhelpful to ethnic amity. Throughout the entire period of the militarization of the ethnic conflict, the state as well as privately controlled media transmitted graphic accounts of Sinhala villagers massacred by Tamil terrorists and how survivors were forced to become refugees in their own land. It is true that all the Sinhala settlements of the north and the majority in the east were eliminated by Tamil terrorists through large-scale murder and intimidation. At the same time television and radio programs and specifically some newspapers carried special

programs honoring soldiers who had “sacrificed their lives in the fight against terrorism”. In comparison to this type of media coverage there were no significant reports of mass-scale military abuses in the combat zones. They were only marginally mentioned in a few English-language journals which the masses did not have access to. What was reported in Sinhala was mostly restricted to left-oriented publications which were routinely censored. In the light of such lopsided media coverage, what was reflected was the brutality of Tamils and how the Sinhalas had become victims of Tamil violence. This explains why during periods of aggressive and brutal military campaigns, the most popular bumper sticker among the Sinhalas bore the slogan “*We Love Our Security Forces*”. Until their unprecedented slaughter of Sinhala youth, which began in late 1988, the security forces were held in high esteem by most Sinhalas as heroes and guardians of Sinhalas and their land. Within such a context, it is not surprising that the news media in general played a major role in hardening the attitudes of Sinhalas towards Tamils. This hardening of attitudes was made particularly easy given the preconceptions the Sinhalas already had of Tamils. More than radio and television it was the newspapers that played this profoundly negative role. Commenting on this situation one observer has noted:

“---I have spent a good part of the last four years studying and criticizing the press in respect of its treatment of ethnic relations, and during that period I have seen the behavior of the greater part of the main stream press grow steadily worse in this area. I have almost come to feel that the irresponsibility of most newspapers in this respect is one of those natural ills that one has to live with, like flood or drought,---”

(Siriwardena, undated : 14).

Different newspapers published by the same publisher have different tones depending on the readership and languages. Government newspapers are normally Sinhala-centric except when certain political undercurrents dictate otherwise. Newspapers of the Upali Group are also on the average Sinhala-centric. However, while the Sinhala language *Divayina* is a typical organ of strong Sinhala nationalism, its English version, *The Island*, is quite capable of moderate and rational reporting when necessary. It must be borne in mind that English-language newspapers are read by Tamils too. So soon after the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots *The Island* was editorially making issue of the “*shame and agony*” of the riots, while its Sinhala version, the *Divayina*, was publishing a series of articles entitled *After the Fall of the Pettah Dictatorship*. Pettah, the commercial centre of Colombo, has a large and a visible Tamil mercantile presence. These merchants have always been a target of rioters. Some of the *Divayina* articles urged the government to consolidate by legislative and administrative action the gains secured for Sinhala merchants by the displacement of Tamil merchants during the riots (Siriwardena, undated : 15). More

recently, this dichotomy emerged again in the manner in which the two newspapers entered the debate involving S.J. Tambiah's book *Buddhism Betrayed?*

The influence of the media in regard to the ethnic conflict is not limited to news items of terrorist attacks and the perceived heroism of Sinhala soldiers. Newspapers, especially Sinhala newspapers play an important part in forming myths and redefining existing myths in a way to suit evolving socio-political situations. The contentious debate that was launched by the Sinhala newspaper *Divayina* in 1984 was aimed at villifying Sinhala social scientists who had critically analyzed and questioned the historical validity of a number of myths relating to the identity of the Sinhalese. These same myths were also instrumental in defining Tamils as the traditional enemies of the Sinhalese. More recently a newspaper article attempted to redefine another established myth. I was introduced to the issue in the course of interviews conducted in 1988, and it dealt with the ancestry of Prince Vijaya, the mythical ancestor of the Sinhalese. Part of the original myth as later popularized and redefined by politicians and others held that Vijaya, and hence the contemporary Sinhalese people were of "North Indian Aryan" origin. This became a problematic aspect of the myth after Indian troops, most of whom were from North India, occupied parts of Sri Lanka, beginning in 1987 (which lasted up to 1990). So the myth had to change. At least one attempt was made in the Sinhala media to depict the grandfather of Vijaya as a Sri Lankan (*Divayina* 14 August 1988). Although I do not know if this version of the myth has gained any popular legitimacy, it was repeated to me on a number of occasions in 1988. Interestingly, the contents of this utterly uncritical article was referred to as "new research".

State television in 1986 aired some unusually perceptive programs. One of them attempted to depict the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of the country by focusing on a different group every week. This program was abruptly discontinued without an explanation. Some Sinhalese publicly complained that a Portuguese dance recital depicted in one of the programs was not suitable to be aired in a Sinhala Buddhist society. They failed to understand that national television was supposed to serve the entire country and not only the Sinhala-Buddhists or that the dance depicted was an integral part of Burgher culture.⁷ The Sinhalese who publicly and privately complained about this particular segment also failed to see that the popular strain of Sinhala music known as *baila* is also a derivation of the music which accompanied this type of dance. A well directed play was broadcast on the same channel in the same year which emphasized the futility and human cost of the ethnic conflict. In more recent years a few popular teledramas (video films) did attempt to address the question

Burghers who are Christians originally referred to the descendents of the Dutch colonizers. Today, the descendents of Portuguese and British colonizers are also included in this group.

of inter-ethnic conflict. However, no authority in Sri Lanka has actively or consistently used TV, radio or newspapers as a means to communicate across ethnic or religious barriers in a non-dyadictic manner.

Influence of Mass-Circulating Books

A number of privately published mass-circulating books have wielded enormous influence in negatively effecting the socialization process. Compared to such publications hardly any progressive material had been available except for some minor publications of leftist political parties. These pamphlets and leaflets are inelegantly written, badly published and have a poor circulation. Moreover, the unpopular political ideology of these political parties (which supports the notion of Tamil self-determination despite being Sinhala-dominated parties) has made most Sinhala to ignore these articles or not take them seriously. A novel titled *Uturata Giya Sebalekuge Kathawak* (the story of a soldier who went north) was published in 1988. Rather than exploring the reality of political violence and ethnic conflict, the book concentrates on the unrealistic love story between a Sinhala soldier and a Tamil woman, and how the gallant soldier acted humanely, apparently influenced by Sinhala-Buddhist ethics instilled by his village monk. The novel is a far fetched and unduly romanticized story which fail to bring out any realistic messages. Instead, it glorified Sinhala soldiers as valiant and decent human beings, even helping enemies and falling in love with an "enemy" woman while carrying out their duty of eliminating Tamil terrorism.

Compared to these books, another category of books has emerged which send completely problematic signals and are numerous and widely distributed. Such publications have an established tradition in Sinhala society. Selected works of Piyadasa Sirisena and Anagarika Dharmapala prior to the 1940s were written in an aggressive nationalistic fashion to enhance Sinhala nationalist pride. A number of books belonging to a similar category have been published in recent years, wielding considerable influence in deteriorating inter-ethnic relations.

The earliest of these was *Adisi Uwadura* (Invisible Danger) accompanied by its English version, *A Diabolical Conspiracy* (1980). The next widely distributed and influential book to be published was *Sinhaluni Budhu Sasuna Beraganive* (Sinhala, Rescue Buddhism). All three books were authored by K. Cyril Mathew, then the Minister of Industries and Scientific Affairs. Being a vehement and overt Sinhala nationalist and a senior member of the government in charge of one of the largest Ministries, Mathew was well placed with resources and organization to publish and distribute such publications throughout the country. Because of his overt anti-Tamil stand he was a hero even to those Sinhala who despised the ruling party, and his writings were popular and widely read. While these books have been criticized as chauvinistic literature by some scholars,

their work is not widely available, and mostly inaccessible in Sinhala. As a result, in most cases publications such as Mathew's have become a standard source of reference in formal and informal discussions. Many libraries in Sinhala schools contained all three copies, as they were distributed free of charge.

Adisi Uwadura and Diabolical Conspiracy deal with the idea that Tamils gain more placements at seats of higher education at the expense of Sinhalas because Tamil examiners are deliberately less strict than their Sinhala counterparts. The books also contained what they claimed "*documentary evidence*" as proof of the allegations made. This particular theme has been a consistent and emotive complaint of the Sinhalas insofar as the ethnic conflict was reflected in education. As a result of the segregated educational policies, university entrance examinations conducted on a national level are graded on a linguistic basis, which means that Tamil students are graded by Tamil (and some Muslim) teachers. This theme and the consequences it implies have the ability to make strong impressions in the mind of the average Sinhala. For most of them this "*proved*" what they had suspected all along, and the alleged proof was furnished by a senior member of the government. Even though Mathew's assertions could not be properly verified, his writing was convincing, especially under the prevailing social and political circumstances. Besides, as already noted, when it comes to internalizing negative information regarding Tamils, the critical abilities of the average Sinhala person do not seem to play a constructive role.

Sinhaluni Budu Sasuna Beraganivu (1984) was even more influential as it dealt with an even more emotional theme--the destruction of Buddhist monuments in the north and east, and therefore traces of perceived Sinhala civilization in those areas. Its cover was illustrated with the picture of a destroyed Buddhist shrine. The main theme of the book was the systematic destruction of Sinhala-Buddhist places of worship and other historical monuments located in the Tamil-dominated Northern and Eastern provinces. Mathew maintained that the purpose of this destruction was to erase all traces of Sinhala-Buddhist presence in those areas. Two processes were claimed to have been employed in this destruction:

1. Total destruction of monuments and historical markers.
2. Building of Hindu temples on the sites on Buddhist monuments.

As in his earlier books he offered convincing "*evidence*" in the form of documents. In the light of the book's revelations, many organizations and pressure groups were created to protect Sinhala - Buddhist historic sites. As a result, a large area enclosing the Seruwila Temple was declared a sacred area, dislocating some long time residents. Newspapers also joined in the debate, making the issue of "*cultural genocide*" of Sinhalas a matter of national

importance. Interestingly enough Mathew's claims and the ensuing outrage of the Sinhala had some legitimacy within limits. Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka were scattered with a variety of archaeological sites, and a large portion of these could be recognized as Buddhist temple sites while many others, to the naked eye, were only heaps of rocks. While the Department of Archaeology had officially identified some of these sites, nothing was done to protect these or excavate the large majority of unidentified sites. It is not surprising that when people (especially poor peasants) built houses they would salvage bricks from these mounds -- an easily accessible and free supply. I have observed the same phenomenon taking place in Sinhala areas like Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kotte. In such a context, while it is true that archaeological sites get destroyed, it cannot be claimed that it is a systematic practice aimed at erasing all signs of Sinhala heritage from Tamil-dominated areas.

On a number of occasions Hindu temples have been built on sites **popularly** recognized as Buddhist. In other cases artifacts from old Buddhist sites were removed and incorporated in new Hindu temples -- many of them recorded in Mathew's book. I have verified a number of such acts including the purposeful destruction of a historically documented tree in the Eastern province as motivated by the urge to erase all traces of what is commonly perceived as indications of a Sinhala presence in the past. While all of my informants denied being involved in such actions, some acknowledged that such actions were taking place especially with the expansion of the Tamil militancy. What is unfortunate is not merely the destruction of archaeological sites by some Tamil militants and nationalists, but what they destroy is not necessarily a part of Sinhala heritage but that of their own.

In a country where more than 80% of the people are literate and many are in the habit of reading, literary materials can wield enormous influence. Despite their far-reaching influence, Mathew's books were limited to descriptive renderings of two themes important to the Sinhala. Mathew used a descriptive literary device to exploit the emotions of the Sinhala. In other words, he simply highlighted certain fears which already existed. Philosophically or ideologically he offered nothing new.

This philosophical and ideological vacuum was filled and revitalized in 1988 when Gunadasa Amarasekera, a well known Sinhala poet and writer, published a book entitled *Ganaduru Mediyama Dakinemi Arunala* (In the Midst of Darkness I can See the Dawn). Unlike Mathew's books it was not a descriptive account of particular themes or events. It was a "*philosophical*" discourse addressing concepts like pluralism, ethnicity and ethnic conflict. It was written in the sophisticated language of a seasoned writer using a tone combining aggression, pseudo-understanding of western social sciences and apparent rationalism. The major focus of the book was to identify what has come to be

identified as the *jathika chinthanaya* (national conscience, national modes of thinking, national spirit or thought).

Despite his liberal use (or abuse) of western social sciences, from the outset he dismissed all Sri Lankan social scientists (western-educated) as a group alienated from their own culture trying to impose western standards and models in their attempts to describe local socio-economic phenomena (Amarasekera 1988: 7, 12, 30). Amarasekera's main approach was formulated within the puritan Sinhala-Buddhist outlook that was popularized by middle-class elements in the post Buddhist revival period. Early in his discourse he complained that long hair was no longer an important part of Sinhala womanhood and that peasant youth were in the habit of wearing three piece suits to weddings (Amarasekera 1988: 3). He was harking back to a different era where the perceived ideal social unit was conceivably the Sinhala village with a reservoir, temple, paddy-field, the forest to collect firewood, women with long hair and men who wore sarongs! The author is intolerant of change and expects the Sinhala society to be a time capsule. Such notions are popular even though many people do not actually follow puritan practices.

The major contribution of the book was in defining *jathika chinthanaya* and ethnic conflict. Amarasekera identifies Anagarika Dharmapala as the most prominent (one of two) Sri Lankan intellectual (Amarasekera 1988: 5, 7). Dharmapala's outspoken anti-minority sentiments, his negative impact on ethnic relations, his obvious western bias on certain issues and his total disregard of popular (village) Buddhism are not discussed. Dharmapala is credited as the first Sri Lankan who recognized and properly articulated the essence of *jathika chinthanaya* nurtured by the Sinhala majority (Amarasekera 1988: 8). He further claims that the "*jathika chinthanaya of Sri Lankans is the Sinhala-Buddhist philosophy which has evolved over a period of more than two thousand years*" (Amarasekera 1988: 12).

It is in his extensive discussion on the nature of *jathika chinthanaya* that he expresses his bizarre ideas on concepts like ethnicity and pluralism. Consider the following analysis (in translation):

"—If we are to achieve this (presumably national liberation) successfully, we must first stop repeating the falsehood that the country is a multi-ethnic, multi religious and multi-cultural state which was taught to us by the British.

The Tamil people in this country have a specific culture and identity of their own. Muslim people also have their own culture and identity. But those cultures or identities are not contradictory to the culture and identity of the Sinhalese. More accurately, those

cultures and identities are versions of the culture and identity of the Sinhala To understand this fact scientific research is not necessary. Let us consider the culture of the Muslims who live here. Is that the culture of Muslims who live in Arab lands? Do the Muslim people who live among us believe that adulterers should be stoned to death or thieves' hands should be chopped off? **Those who live amongst us are Sinhala Buddhist Muslim people . In the North (a reference to Tamil areas) there are Sinhala - Buddhist Tamil people who are better than us (i.e., better Sinhala Buddhists!).** The reason for this is because over the last two thousand years those people have lived under the shadow of the Sinhala Buddhist majority. If this is to continue and we want to live in harmony, **we should first eliminate the half truth that this country is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious one.** We must believe that our society consists of many groups such as Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims who are ultimately derived from one major cultural heritage. If 'Sinhala Buddhist' is an unpleasant term to identify that cultural heritage, we must find another term for it."

(Amarasekera 1988: 23)⁸

Obviously Amarasekera's argument regarding ethnicity is different from the conventional Sinhala position where non- Sinhala groups are considered alien. Amarasekera on the other hand recognizes those groups as extensions of Sinhala-Buddhist cultural heritage. Despite the obvious influences different cultures and religions have had on each other, to classify them as extensions or versions of Sinhala-Buddhist cultural heritage is a bizarre misunderstanding of facts. Instead of the conventional outright rejection of non-Sinhala groups, Amarasekera suggests a somewhat paternalistic but nevertheless an almost total assimilation of all groups within the larger identity of Sinhala-Buddhists. He is only willing to allow a marginal recognition of distinctiveness. His assertiveness is based on an assumption that there already has been a substantial degree of assimilation. However, such a complete level of assimilation has not occurred except in certain sections of the population and, given the realities of Sri Lanka, such an assimilation is generally impractical and particularly unacceptable to minorities.

Amarasekera further suggests that Tamil terrorism is not an extension of the ethnic conflict but the result of an imperial conspiracy associated with a counter conspiracy initiated by India. His argument continues as follows:

"Nothing can be more false than identifying the Tiger attacks as part of the language or ethnic conflict. --an oral cancer originates from a minor bruise. That bruise which is the result of a

protruding tooth later becomes a death-inducing cancer. At that point it is classified as a cancer and not a bruise. Suggesting Tiger attacks are a result of the ethnic conflict or language problem is akin to calling an oral cancer a bruise. In the same manner that the removal of the tooth will not cure the cancer, the resolution of the ethnic conflict will not resolve Tiger attacks."

(Amarasekera 1988: 7)

Amarasekera's disassociation of Tamil terrorism or militancy from the ethnic conflict is a prelude to the justification of repressive military action. One reason why Tamil terrorism could not be managed was the insistence of Sri Lankan policy-makers to view it as a purely military matter requiring purely military solutions. For almost a decade, the military operations simply amounted to superficial solutions. The larger and real problem remained underneath unresolved. Thus Amarasekera, while encouraging ethnic and religious assimilation within the larger Sinhala Buddhist identity, refuses to accept the emergence of Tamil militancy and terrorism as a result of ethnic conflict. To him, it is simply an imperial and Indian conspiracy which must be militarily overwhelmed. Insofar as the resolution of the ethnic conflict is concerned, both these views are as impractical as are they outrageous. However in any society, what matters is not rationality or accuracy of such views, but the manner in which they are perceived and internalized. Amarasekera's book wielded widespread influence among Sinhala masses, especially the youth, both at university and school level. Some Sinhala newspapers like *Divayina* have also helped in boosting these ideas while dissenting opinion is not given much space within their pages. At the time of its publication only one Sinhala journal, *Mawatha*, which had a limited circulation, came up with a highly critical evaluation of Amarasekera's work (Uyangoda 1988).⁹

Almost all university undergraduates and many students who were interviewed strongly recommended that I read the book, which was what initially led me to it. A number of low-ranking JVP activists suggested the same thing. Later it became clear that the book had become a primary vehicle of political socialization for some JVP recruits despite its analysis of Marxism as a failure in Sri Lanka. Whether the book was an informal or a formal mechanism of socialization within the JVP is not clear.

In Place of a Conclusion

It should then be clear that ethnic considerations, political interference and socio-political compulsions influence the behaviour of the media, while all forms of media in turn have a strong influence on the Sinhalas in creating perceptions

⁹ This situation however, has changed for the better in recent years with the emergence of an alternate media.

and attitudes detrimental to conflict-free relations with Tamils. It must also be clear that the socialization process in the Sinhala society is directly influenced by the media, and together these processes play an important role in deteriorating relations between Sinhala and Tamils. The preceding discussion was merely an attempt to place the inter-ethnic conflict in the context of the overall socialization process within the Sinhala society. In other words, this was not an attempt to suggest solutions, only to identify a problem. However, in a country such as Sri Lanka where the government is omnipresent, this state of affairs can only change with the active encouragement, of the government. In the final analysis catch words such as "political solutions", "military option" and so on will merely be catch words since the problems we face go far beyond such short term options. A change needs to be effected in the manner all Sri Lankans perceive each other, for which anthropologists or academics in general cannot offer magic solutions. They can merely place specific problems in different contexts. However, what is clear is that if necessary changes are not effected in the media and the availability of relevant information (which will hopefully have a positive affect on socialization), Sri Lankans will continue to wage war with themselves.

References

Amarasekera, G. (1988). *Ganaduru Mediyama Dakinemi Ardunalu*. Nugegoda, Sri Lanka: Piyavi Book Publishers.

Gunasinghe, N. (1987). "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Perceptions and Solutions". In: N. Gunasinghe and C. Abeysekera Ed., *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Social scientists Association.

Kapferer, B. (1988). *Legends of People Myths of State*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Mathew, C. Cyril (1979). *Diabolical Conspiracy*. Colombo: JF & I Printers.
(1979). *Adisi Uwadura*. Colombo: P. Gangodagedara Saha Samagama.
(1981). *Sinhaluni Budhu Sasuna Beraganiwu*. Colombo: Seruwila Pujanagara Sanwardana Samithiya.

Uyangoda, J. 1988. Jathika Chinthanaye Ganadura. In, *Mawatha*, # 47 (July-September). Biyagama, Sri Lanka: Mawatha Publications.