

The Jaffna Social System: Continuity and Change under Conditions of War

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Introduction¹

This paper deals with three issues: firstly, it shortly presents the traditional social system of Jaffna in so far as it differs from those both in South India and the rest of Sri Lanka, secondly, discusses the role specifically of the Karaiyars in the past and present contexts and thirdly shows how this social system is being maintained, albeit in modified form, under conditions of extreme stress and change. In other words, I want to illustrate how the frame or structure of the system remains in place while the content changes.² This entails the retention of myths, ideals and symbols while their meaning and also the groups that appropriate these change dramatically. I hope to show at the end of the paper that within the caste-oriented and -dominated social system of Jaffna there lie already the seeds for the development of a wider group identity and consciousness which over time develops into nationalism under which caste is subsumed. This happens precisely when the dominant or hegemonic groups change, i.e. when, in our case, instead of the leading group of Vellalars the Karaiyars appropriate the symbols and ideas of 'Tamilness' and Tamil tradition and modify and extend them horizontally and vertically. A much wider conception of who is a 'Tamil' results. This change worked itself out over a considerable time span, from the beginning of the 19th to the end of our century, and the Karaiyars took the leading role fairly late in the process. More specifically I then want to explore the connections between the 'caste' system

1 Note on Transliteration: Quotations and references of Tamil works have been transliterated according to the *Tamil Lexicon*, University of Madras, Repr. 1982. All other Tamil names and titles are given in the usual Anglicised form.

2 Sudipta Kaviraj, Writing, Speaking, Being: language and the historical formation of identities, in Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Dietmar Rothermund (Hg.) *Nationalstaat und Sprachenkonflikte in Süd- und Südostasien*, Stuttgart 1992, p. 25-68.

as it exists in Jaffna and the development of the militant struggle to show that part of the difficulties of legitimation the militants have till this day, stem directly from concepts of caste and caste, or group, conflicts.

The consequences of this change of perception and leadership are at the moment worked out in Jaffna alongside a bloody and increasingly brutal civil war, that is not only directed against the Sinhalese, but also and increasingly, against the suppression and exploitation of the lower castes in Jaffna by the Vellalars.

The Caste System in Jaffna: Similarities and Differences to Tamilnadu

The caste system of Jaffna has some unique features which mark it apart not only from India as a whole, but even from Tamil society in India with which it is otherwise closely linked. In Tamilnadu, unlike in North India, a tiny minority of Brahmins (3%) presides over a mass of clean and unclean castes not differentiated according to the fourfold varna system, though encompassing vast internal differences. In some instances in Tamil literature these were termed *Cuttiran*. However, this term gained currency for the non-Brahmin castes of Tamilnadu only under the British. The majority of these 'Sudras', namely the Vellalars (a term deriving from agriculture and landed property) are actually the leading, dominant, and numerically strongest caste all throughout Jaffna with Brahmins nearly totally absent. Incidentally, the Vellalars resent being termed 'Sudras'. Only a handful of Brahmin families are found there, and these Brahmins are 'kept' in the temples by them.³ This means that Brahmins in Jaffna never attained the preponderant position in education, professions and civil service they had in the Madras presidency in the 19th and early 20th centuries and against which the Vellalars here agitated. Precisely this position was taken by the Jaffna Vellalars themselves, also and particularly vis-à-vis the Sinhalese.⁴

3 See for an Indian parallel David Washbrook, *Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu: Non-Brahmanism, Dravidianism, and Tamil Nationalism*, in: F. Frankel, M. Rao (eds.) *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*. Delhi 1989, pp. 204-264, esp. p. 211-215.

4 This, incidentally, makes for interesting comparisons between communal quotas in Madras, Standardisation in Sri Lanka and a host of similar measures and their underlying ideologies, the difference being, of course, that in one case the distinction was class- and caste-based, in the other ethnic.

The Vellalar as the lords of the ritual in the sense of ordering, although not performing it (that would be beneath them) uphold the world order.⁵ Pfaffenberger has described and demonstrated this in a pioneering study some years ago. His is the first indepth study of the Jaffna caste system as an independent entity.⁶ The feature of the land-holding caste being numerically and socially dominant is mirrored by the Goyigamas among the Sinhalese, who are to all intents and purposes the same caste. However, the caste system in Jaffna is much more rigid than that among the Sinhalese, and Pfaffenberger has shown that that has partly to do with the fact that caste boundaries are not clearly defined and the differences between high and low or clean and unclean castes are at best marginal, based on thoroughly superficial external attributes. Castes must therefore not change their mode of dressing, their jewelry or customs and behaviour, not only because their caste then would not be visible at first glance anymore, but apparently even more because implicitly, this change of external attributes also subtly changes their caste: caste is thus tied to attributes which can be changed at will, not to any inherent qualities of the person or, indeed, to birth. Compared to India, the pace of change has been very much slower in Jaffna, since in Tamilnadu, these were conflicts and problems that were fought out already in the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁷ But in both cases the point is crucial: low caste, lowliness and thus pollution has to be made *visible* by outer attributes, it is not inherently recognisable, and this is implicitly accepted by high-caste witnesses who claim precisely this when complaining that e.g. the loosening of dress codes prevents caste recognition. Pfaffenberger has argued in a subsequent article that this makes the whole ontology and theory of caste in Tamil society doubtful at worst and ambivalent at best and could be the one factor to pull the rug under the whole caste structure by robbing it of its legitimation and justification:⁸ if you cannot

5 Thurston described a similar ideology for some groups of Vellalars in Tamilnadu at the beginning of this century. E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Madras 1907, p. 371; cf. also *Purananurul* 82.

6 Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Caste in Tamil Culture. The Foundations of Sudra Domination in Tamil Sri Lanka*, Bombay 1982.

7 See e.g. Robert L. Hardgrave jr., *The Nadars of Tamilnad - The Political Culture of a Community in Change*, Berkeley 1969.

8 Bryan Pfaffenberger, The Political Construction of Defensive Nationalism: the 1968 Temple-Entry Crisis in Northern Sri Lanka, in: *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, 1990, pp. 78-96. Thurston complained about this many decades earlier. "It may be imagined what a mixture of blood arises from this practice and how puzzling the variations in the cranial measurements of Vellalars at random are likely to become." Thurston,

tell caste by looking at somebody anymore, then where are the differences? If nobility is acquired by outward symbols and not by inherent characteristics, then anybody can lay claim to it.

To retain their dominance, the Vellalars therefore have to define and interpret marginal differences as vital, leading to more rigid, visible and highly artificial caste boundaries.⁹ On the whole, this strategy has been singularly unsuccessful: the well-known proverb '*mella mella ellām Vellālarka! ākinrana*' testifies to this strikingly.¹⁰ Numerous studies have been written over the years to demonstrate the extent of change in caste rank, status or affiliation in Tamilnadu and Jaffna made possible by changing the name, domicile, title etc.¹¹ Thus Jaffna is caught in the dilemma of trying to hold on to high caste status for its elite members. but at the same time defining caste in such a way as to make it impossible for these distinctions to be upheld, constantly extending the range of groups coming under the term 'elite'. This is similar to what has happened in TN over the centuries, with the distinction that here these differentiations are nowadays widely irrelevant, whereas in Jaffna both the addition to the fold and the rigidity are of supreme importance.

This led to problems right from the time foreign powers dominated Jaffna and tried to understand the system of social stratification. Baldaeus simply describes the different castes, their characteristics and the way the social system is upheld, and especially the rivalries between the Vellalars and the Madapallis (a caste who claimed higher status than the Vellalars and in some cases called themselves Brahmins), a caste then soon to be amalgamated among the Vellalars and reconstituted as the particularly 'proud' Vellalars of Manipay.¹² Later authors, both Dutch and English who tried to define the caste system floundered every time.¹³ Neither religion nor occupation was a reliable boundary, since Christians could belong to any number of castes without losing their

op. cit., p. 376. He did not draw the logical conclusion that this should make his attempts at defining castes on the basis of physiology or race questionable.

9 Pfaffenberger, op. cit., p. 84.

10 'Slowly, slowly, they all become Vellalar.'

11 Cf. Pandian, op. cit., p. 108ff; cf. also Thurston, op. cit., p. 376.

12 Phillippus Baldaeus, *Naawkeurige Beschryvinge van Malabar en Choromandel, en het Machtige Eyland Ceylon*, Amsterdam 1672.

13 See for example the census of 1829 where the high Tamil and Sinhalese castes are lumped together as Bellale (Vellalars) and other castes are defined by their occupation, religion or domicile and then the society is again divided according to religion in a different column. *Return of the Population of the Island of Ceylon 27th Jan 1824*, Colombo 1827, PRO CO59.

caste status (though Catholics were in the majority Karaiyars and Protestants Vellalars), and Vellalars could perform a whole range of occupations and professions.¹⁴ Differentiation increasingly tended to run along family, lineage and domicile lines (the high Vellalars of Manippay or the - lower - vegetarians of Chavakaccheri). However, *cāti* - in a sense of race, nation or even ethnicity - the Tamils are a *cāti*, the Sinhalese another and the Muslims again a different one - remained a fixed point in the Jaffna consciousness. Works on history and social history from the end of the 19th century testify to this. In these works, the history of the settlement of Jaffna by the different *cātis* and their retainers and the consequent high or low status of these castes according to the time of arrival and the history of the various castes of the peninsula take an inordinately large space.¹⁵

Caste differentiations and the emphasis on the presumed high caste of the settlers originated probably precisely because the new settlers were of a comparatively low caste and wanted to portray themselves as higher than the original inhabitants. It should also be noted that until the first decades of this century, it was considered much more prestigious to be a 'recent' settler who could trace one's ancestry back to a mythical *ūr* in India. The more recent the immigration, the higher the caste status.¹⁶ Connections to India were valued, and to have been settled by the Cola kings carried a special social cachet, as the myths of origin of the Vanniyar chieftains in the East clearly show.¹⁷ In the process we also come across several low castes that are not found in Tamilnadu. They

14 These must, however, be respectable ones, as defined by Arumuka Navalar, *Palapatam* (Lessons for Children), I-IV (Jaffna 1871, 1885, 1876, 1916), here: IV, p. 48.

15 K. Veluppillai, *Yalppana Vaipava Kaumuti*, Jaffna, Vasavilan 1918, C. Nanappirakacar, OMI, *Yalppana Vaipava Vimarcanam* (A Critical History of Jaffna), Accuveli 1928, Civanantan, *Yalppana Kutiyeram* (The Settlement of Jaffna), Kuala Lumpur, FMS 1933, who postulates two types of immigrants: Vanniyars and Vellalar Mudaliars, p. 1.

16 *Yalppana Vaipava Malai* (The Garland of Events in Jaffna), by Mayilvakanap Pulavar, with an Appendix by Kula Capanatan, Colombo 1953, p. 28f; see also C. Brito, *The Yalpana Vaibhava Malai or the History of the Kingdom of Jaffna*, translated from the Tamil by C. Brito, Colombo 1879, Annex, p. LXXXVII.

17 *Vaiyapuri Pillai, Vaiya Patal*, ed. by K.S. Nadarajah, Colombo 1980, p. 36/37, 42. On the other hand, Jaffna Tamils consider themselves the better, 'purer' Tamils who speak the 'purer' language, to those of India who have been subject to all sorts of decline, decadence and harmful influences. I have a strong impression, however, that this perception is of recent origin and did not prevail until the 50s or even 60s of our century. The 'purity' or seen from the other side, the 'antiquity' of Jaffna Tamil was already remarked upon in India in the 1850s.

are assumed to be former Vellalar and their fall from grace is described in profound, though seldom factual, detail to justify the system as it stands at the time of writing. These are the Pallar and Nalavar, who were allegedly guilty of attempted incest and adultery, and the Koviya. Especially the latter support the assumption that these were formerly dominant castes with maybe unusual social and ritual practices in the area pushed out of their positions of power by the new settlers. The Koviya are commonly assumed to have been high-caste Sinhalese subjugated by the Tamils, wherefore they are a low and servant caste, but in contrast to all other castes with similar status, ritually clean.¹⁸

Only in the wake of European scholarship and a rather insane equation of 'early immigration' and 'original inhabitants' with 'right to the soil and to rule' a turnaround began on the side of the Tamils which led them to claim not only early immigration, but that they were the 'original and first inhabitants' of the island for more than 10000 years and to make this into a matter of status and prestige and the right to political power.¹⁹

To be a Vellalar was thus never enough. On the other hand, to be a Tamil meant to be a Vellalar, and to be a Vellalar meant to be a Tamil until the first decades of this century.²⁰ Any non-Vellalar, Tamil-speaking as he may be, was not really considered a Tamil until at least the end of the 19th century. Thus, from quite early, an ethnic moment crept into the concept of caste (*cāti*) among the Tamils, and a concept of caste into 'ethnic' differentiations. This had astonishingly little or nothing to do with whether one spoke Tamil or not, a feature that is nowadays so important, and in spite of the fact that even then, Tamil held a high place in the esteem of the Jaffnese, but that was the 'pure' Tamil spoken by the high castes. When in the early decades of this century Tamil consciousness grew more and more acute, it was always made quite clear, that to be a Tamil for the leaders of Tamil society and the politicians could only mean to be high caste, and that meant Vellalar. Lower castes simply did not enter the equation. This is clear from oblique references to the

18 Baldaeus, op. cit., *Vaiyapatal*, op. cit., p. 49, see also Pfaffenberger, *Caste in Tamil Culture*, op. cit., p. 37f.

19 The change in perception and attitude in the 30s is documented by *Nanappirakacar*, *Yalppana Vaipava Vimarcanam*, op. cit., p. 149, when he says about the snobbery of who was earlier or later: "At a time when under the foreign government all princely privileges have gone, it is appropriate that we in future all live together as equals without looking down on anybody instead of despising one another in the way of 'the ones who came early despise the latecomers'."

20 C. Nanappirakacar, OMI, *Tamilin Purvacarittiramum Camayamum* (new edition), Jaffna 1932, p. 19-22.

Tamils as being the leading professions and developers of the country²¹ and from quite outspoken references to the lower castes as Adi-Dravidas, original. i.e. 'primitive' inhabitants. Only slowly and unwillingly was it conceded that lower castes might have a right to calling themselves Tamils and enjoying the privileges this brought at the time. Nanappirakacar achieved this by claiming that by definition all Tamils were Vellalars, only with different prefixes!²² This acknowledgment came, notably when the right to vote was extended and in the teeth of bitter opposition to it by elite members like Ramanathan who wanted to confine the franchise to the high castes.²³ At the beginning of the century, it was still quite explicitly said, that Tamil equalled Vellalars:

"When the Tamils are spoken of in South India, the Vellalas are meant as being the Tamils par excellence."²⁴

Arunachalam also mentions that nowadays [beginning of this century; the author] the Vellalars are increasingly challenged by fishercastes who have profited from the opportunities of sea trade under the British.²⁵ On the whole the first decades of the century were a time of heightened caste conflict, though the 19th Century had seen its share, especially over the attempts of lower castes to assume the paraphernalia of Vellalars or to deny caste services to Vellalar due to conversion.²⁶ It was said, for instance, that the school which Arumuka Navalar founded in 1847, had nothing to do with religious but everything with caste differences, because high-caste parents resented a Nalavar boy being admitted to the

21 E.g. *The Memorandum of Sir P. Râmanâthan on the Recommendations of the Donoughmore Commissioners appointed by the Rt. Hon. the Sec. of State for the Colonies to report upon the Reform of the Existing Constitution of the Government of Ceylon (1924-1930)*, London 1930, p. 5, 18-21, 43/44.

22 Nanappirakacar, op. cit. Marai Malai Atikal undertook something similar in his work *Vellalar Nakarikam*, Madras 1923.

23 *Memorandum of Sir P. Râmanâthan*, loc. cit., p. 16/17.

24 P. Arunachalam, *Population: The island's races, religions, languages, castes, and customs*, in Arnold Wright (ed.), *20th century impressions of Ceylon*, London 1907, pp. 323-355, here: p. 352.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 354.

26 About denied caste services see S.P.G. (Ceylon Letters Received Series) 6.7.1894 (Rhodes House, Oxford), see also Administration Reports, Part I, Misc. 1883 by E. Elliot, PRO CO57/90, p. 99, 104A, 111Af, 120A, where caste unrest in Batticaloa and Trincomalee is reported, mainly because the Nalavars appropriate rights which the higher caste (Karaiyars and Vellalars) consider above their state. Another interesting instance is reported in *The Ceylon Patriot* 8.6. and 15.6.1871.

school where Navalar taught under Peter Percival and pressured him to open a school only accessible for Vellalars. The controversy over this school raged throughout the rest of 1847 and 1848, and even in later years it was occasionally denounced.²⁷ However, these isolated instances became bitterer and more fundamental in the 30s. The *Utaya Tārakai* (UT = Morning Star) reports caste unrest in Sutumalai and other places as late as 1923, when some Parambas wanted to have drummers for a funeral, something which was normally reserved for Vellalars.²⁸ These reports and others sparked a discussion in the letters column of the UT of several months' duration in 1923, where voices both for and against caste distinctions found a place. One interesting letter to the editor in favour of caste for instance equated caste with race.²⁹ The principle of caste was similarly justified some years earlier in the *Hindu Organ*.³⁰ The character of these caste conflicts can be illustrated most lucidly with the equal-seating controversy of 1935: this started with a directive by the government to provide for low-caste children in state-aided schools to sit on benches like all other children instead of on the floor as had been hitherto the rule.³¹ This simple demand created a quite inordinate amount of opposition, resentment and bitterness. Not only Tamil politicians like Ramanathan wrote long memoranda to the English government against this ruling, but even ordinary citizens like a group of Vellalars from Urelu signed petitions against it in droves.³² This memo contained 24 pages of signatures, mainly from Urelu, Vasavilan and Punalakkattavan, which led Acting Dir. of Educ. Robison to comment on 5.9.1930:

"I cannot say how far the signatories to this petition are entitled to represent public opinion in Jaffna nor how far any of them understand

27 *Utaya Tārakai* (Morning Star, hereafter: UT), 25.11.1847.

28 *UT* 28.4. and 26.5.1923.

29 *Ibid.*, 11.8.23.

30 *Hindu Organ*, 26.11.1916.

31 'Equal seating' had been introduced by the government on 14.6. and 16.8.1929 for grant-in-aid schools (Sess. Paper XXVIII/1929) against violent opposition: see e.g. the memorandum from the Leaders of the Villages in Jaffna-Ceylon to the Right Hon'ble, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, London, Puttur, 20th June 1930, Encl. to Desp. 763 of 17th Sept. 1930, CO 54/903/5. For a favourable view of the ruling see Memorandum of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils' Service League to the Right Honourable Lord Passfield, SoS for the Colonies, Jaffna 2nd July 1930, CO 54/903/5, Encl. to Desp. 674 of 22nd Aug. 1930.

32 *Ibid.* Urelu is till today one of the most conservative places in the peninsula.

what the Memo contains except that they do not wish to forego any of their privileges of bullying those of lower caste."³³

It is nowadays hard to understand this opposition, since it was by no means intended to let the low-caste children sit on benches next to the high-caste ones at all, but at a 'safe' distance from the others, yet even this was objected to. The memo stressed that caste equality was not the question, but that economic development was important without seeing that one would be meaningless without the other.³⁴ It was never spelt out what this economic development for the lower caste should look like. The extent to which the high castes were prepared to go in their opposition to the scheme is shown poignantly in the Memo of the Depressed Tamils' Service League, where instances of moral and economic blackmail to keep low-caste children out of school are described, but also more violent forms of pressure:

"...wherever the low caste people insist on their right to equal seating, the high caste people are ready to institute false prosecutions of theft, incendiarism etc., against them."³⁵

The low castes took this opportunity to demand special representation for them under the new Donoughmore constitution of 1931 which provided not only universal franchise, but maybe even more significantly, abolished communal representation.

It seems that what was resented most was the fact that the English government had undertaken to tell the Tamils how to order their own affairs and found fault with the way they did it. That grated since the Tamils thought that their way of dealing with society was the best ever devised. Moreover, they had hitherto cooperated with the colonial rulers mainly because these left their social system severely alone.

The contemptuous attitude to the low castes even after they had been accepted as Tamils is shown clearly by Ramanathan in his objection to the franchise in 1930: the low castes were too stupid and uneducated to use the franchise, a herd following a leader, a vulgar mass. They should not get above themselves. but be led by politicians of wisdom and know-

33 Ibid., p.5.

34 Ibid.

35 Memo of the Depressed Tamils' Service League, op. cit.

ledge and if they proved deserving they might be given a limited franchise in the distant future.³⁶

Another factor exacerbated the caste conflict in the 20s and 30s: in the 19th century the churches had not so much fought caste distinctions as disregarded them in their educational efforts. This changed with increasing political consciousness and the example of Gandhi's efforts at abolishing the injustices of caste in India, the churches took a more decisive stand in contrast to the government. The missionaries began to criticise the caste system's injustices as far as they understood them and advocated abolition. This invited attacks, the most effective of which was the claim that the missionaries themselves did not live what they preached and upheld both caste and racial distinctions in their personal lives.³⁷ At the same time young Christian and Hindu men not only loudly demanded abolition of caste barriers, but proceeded to implement these demands. High-caste founder members of the Jaffna Youth Congress (JYC) committed 'outrages' such as equal seating and interdining with members of lower caste during their conferences (many JYC members were from non-Vellalar castes and members of the Depressed Class League). This frightened the conservative elite of Jaffna nearly out of their wits, and they strenuously objected to such goings-on.³⁸ Precisely for reasons of upholding the caste system and as a counterweight to the liberal and 'Christian-dominated' JYC, the YMHA (Young Men's Hindu Association) was founded in the 20s to teach young men not only discipline and healthy habits, but also respect for their elders' customs and beliefs and conformity in every aspect of life. Individuality should particularly be discouraged.³⁹ In his book about the history of Jaffna S. Rasanayagam went so far as to attribute the introduction of diseases like cholera and small-pox to Jaffna to the Indian 'coolies' who came from India through the northern villages and infected the population! After they ceased to come to Jaffna, but went through Mannar instead, he

36 Râmanâthan, op. cit., p. 16/17. It is probably unnecessary to mention that he was also violently opposed to voting rights for women.

37 *UT* 28.7.23, *The Ceylon Patriot* echoed this on 11.7.23. This was complained about already some decades earlier by E.J. Robinson, *Hindu Pastors. A Memorial*, London 1867, p. 58.

38 Cf. The Jaffna Youth Congress, in: S. Kathirgamar, *Handy Perinbanayagam, A Memorial Volume*, Jaffna 1980, p. 6f.

39 *The Young Hindu Magazine of the YMHA*, 1st Quarter 1917, p. 8-10; see also on this topic *Hindu Organ* 22.3.1923.

claims, Cholera vanished in Jaffna, a patently untrue statement.⁴⁰ This was in a new garb the repetition of a statement by Muttutampi from the beginning of the century, who bewailed the breakdown in the caste system brought about by the colonial powers, that led to caste mingling bringing unclean castes into contact with clean ones and so contaminating a healthy environment.⁴¹ Such then was the climate in which the Tamil consciousness of the pre-independence time evolved: not, as in India, in a climate of at least professed equality and social justice, but on the basis of explicit social stratification as well as discrimination. And the Tamil demands themselves stressed this differentiation not only among themselves, but also between themselves and the other ethnicities in Ceylon: because they were a privileged elite which had got a lion's share of jobs and professions, they should be favoured with a lion's share of political power as well. It was a demand not based on social justice for a minority, but on social privileges for an elite.

It was against conceptions like these that the JYC argued in the 20s and thus, like the militants, rejected others meddling in their social affairs with more justification than the conservative elite, outside interference claiming altruism without looking to its own social ills was not the way to reform. The demands of the JYC are increasingly voiced in the Tamil papers and magazines of the time.⁴² The efforts of the JYC found their climax in the boycott of the Donoughmore Constitution 1931, which they called to press for full Swaraj and to underline their demand

40 C. Racanayakam, *Yalppanac Carittiram - Ankileyar Kalam* (British Period in the History of Jaffna), Jaffna 1934 (?), p. 156, 186-188. He was a civil servant, lay historian, member of the CBRAS and the author of *Ancient Jaffna*, Jaffna 1926, a study remarkable among others for its attempts to declare the whole of Sri Lanka Dravidian and to reduce the 'South Indian connection' in its history to the 'Jaffna connection'! This ties in with Pfaffenberger's description of the unclean castes as the ones who take all pollution and uncleanness away from the high castes and thus keep them clean (and healthy, one assumes), but become forever and ineradicably polluted in the process. What this theory does not explain is whether the low castes are further affected by the uncleanness (do they die from it) or are impervious to it.

41 A Muttutampippillai, *Yalppana Carittiram* (History of Jaffna), Jaffna 1912, p. 39. Muttutampippillai was a religious scholar and lay historian.

42 In the forefront of these efforts were mainly Christian papers; cf. *UT* 26./31.5.1923 and passim, but also already in the 19th century: cf. *UT* 26.10.1849 and throughout the 1840s and 50s.; Bharata Nesan's column (a pseudonym I suppose for a member of the Youth Congress) in the *Ceylon Patriot* throughout 1923.

for caste reform, but that was also the beginning of their decline.⁴³ The Sinhalese misunderstood the motivation for the boycott, and the conservative Jaffna elite found it then easy to turn the tide. The JYC could not prevent the outrages of the equal-seating controversy which developed at the same time. And the efforts of the angry young men were not quite what they seemed to be at first, because in the end, the YMHA's efforts proved to reign supreme: most of those who in their young days had cherished the radical ideals of the Youth Congress returned to the fold later and became staid and conservative politicians of the old ilk. These efforts were therefore not enough to bring about reform speedily and thoroughly enough to prevent outside perceptions rigidifying especially after independence, so that the Sinhalese were able to claim that the Tamil demand for equal or fair treatment was nothing but an attempt to hang on to caste privileges. The Federal Party (FP) in its founding manifesto 1949 put caste abolition in its programme, but this was mere rhetoric and nothing decisive was done to see to this for many years to come. The Tamil Congress, founded earlier in 1941, was even more equivocal about the caste question, as is shown by its reluctant welcome of low-caste support in Jaffna. While it is said that election campaigns and membership drives among the lower castes are of supreme importance, at the same time it is important to explain to them what the TC is for: for political aims and definitely not to improve the social standing of these lower castes.⁴⁴ As late as the 1960s, attempts by the Ceylonese government to eradicate caste discrimination were equally resented, especially as they often went hand in hand with attempts at conversion to Buddhism.⁴⁵ This in itself was as much hypocrisy as the Tamils' attitude, since the Sinhalese have their own, though much milder, caste system, and look down upon converts from lower castes (e.g. the harijans from Maharashtra) with disdain.⁴⁶ Pfaffenberger mentions these efforts in his

43 For this see Jane Russell, *Dance of the Turkey Cock - the Jaffna Boycott of 1931*, in *CJHSS* 1978/3, p. 47-67.

44 Letter by E.M.V. Naganathan on 27.7.1946 in answer to Vadivel's letter from 24.7.; M. Kantharatnam, Vaddukkodai to G.G. Ponnambalam, 18.12.1946; see also correspondence of 1946 by K. Vadivel, Sabarutnam, Kulasingham, Vinasithamby, in the papers of G.G. Ponnambalam. I want here to express my thanks to Mr. G.G. Ponnambalam jr. of Columbo for granting me free access to his father's papers.

45 K.M. de Silva, *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi-ethnic Societies*. Sri Lanka 1880-1985, Lanham, New York, London 1986, p. 219.

46 P. Ramasami, *New Delhi and Sri Lanka, Four Decades of Politics and Diplomacy*, New Delhi et al. 1987, p. 139f.

article on the Temple entry crisis of 1968.⁴⁷ An eye-witness told me, that nobody had anything against the low castes entering the temple as long as they were clean and did it quietly without making a political issue out of it. Pfaffenberger reports likewise that low castes had been in the habit of entering the temple individually for quite some time past, but that the trustees resented them doing so *en masse* and with a high degree of publicity.⁴⁸ That was the crux. Pfaffenberger claims that exactly this attitude creates ambiguity about the justification and legitimacy of the struggle against 'Sinhalese Rule' in Jaffna, because this can also be seen as an attempt at perpetuating an oppressive social system with privileges for a certain group in the name of 'protection of culture.'⁴⁹

What these instances and especially the equal-seating controversy and the temple entry crisis show, however, is less the impossibility of change and the resistance to it by the elite, but exactly the helplessness of this elite in the face of insidious change. They had not been able to prevent low-caste children from entering schools nor could they prevent low caste people from entering the temple. They fought a rearguard action to hold on to the visible markers of differentiation and high-caste status: if the low castes could not be kept out of the schools, at least let them sit on the floor to show that they are not of us; if we cannot keep them out of the temple, at least let them come unobtrusively, so that things at least seem unchanged. The artificial dividing lines must be maintained because otherwise chaos will prevail, i.e., the precarious hold the elites have on their claim to status will vanish completely. That also explains the violence of the reaction in both cases. It should be stressed again that this was in quite distinct contrast to events in South India and Tamilnadu particularly.⁵⁰

A case of retrogression of the 'angry young men' is C. Suntheralingam, a Tamil politician who, having advocated caste abolition in his youth, in 1968 rejected the temple entry claim in Mavittapuram. But he was also one of the first advocates of Ilam (Eylom), and there we have

47 Pfaffenberger, *The Political Construction of Defensive Nationalism* ..., p. 87.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 89; see also n. 91.

49 *Idem*, *The Cultural Dimension of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka*, in: *Asian Survey* 21, 1981, pp. 1145-1155, here: 1149.

50 I do not find Russell's reasons for the failure of the JYC and its attempts at reform convincing, especially her laying it all at the feet of the supposed 'Indomania' of the liberal Tamils. On the contrary, I think that the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka got really intractable only when the wider outlook of both sides towards India was lost and Tamils and Sinhalese began to focus narrowly on their own little patch.

the Tamil dilemma in a nutshell.⁵¹ The Tamil struggle after independence continued to be seen as the attempt by a privileged minority to hold on to these privileges and their way of exploiting not only the Sinhalese, but even their own lower castes, if necessary by secession. Moreover, the issue was at this time much more complex and did also address the very real injustices and discrimination meted out to the Tamils by the Sri Lankan government. But the argument of caste suppression could be presented by the Sinhalese to outsiders to deny the legitimacy of the Tamil struggle.

This, however, had in the end the useful effect of shaking up Jaffna society sufficiently to make it realize that without efforts to redress the injustices of the caste system and to encourage the lower castes to demand their rights both within and without the Hindu social and religious system any of their demands, however justified, would stand little chance of a sympathetic hearing. It was this, too, among others, which led to the temple entry controversy in 1968.

In a way, though, this only strengthened the point of the Sinhalese: until just four years before the Tamil militant struggle began in earnest it was still possible to deny the lower castes temple entry in Jaffna, something which had been eradicated in India long ago. And even in the late 70s when many forms of discrimination, especially in the educational sector, had been abolished, intercaste marriages were still few and far between and could, if they happened, lead to the ostracization of whole families in the Jaffna social system.⁵² Unlike in Tamilnadu where it was the majority Vellalars and later the lower castes against the Brahmin privileges, here it was the privileged against all other castes, particularly the Karaiyars.

51 C. Suntheralingam, *Eylom: Beginnings of Freedom Struggle*. Eleven Documents, Colombo (?) 1967 (?) and even more forcefully idem, *Plight of Eylom Tamils under Colvin's Constitution*. Seven open letters to the Hon. Colvin R. de Silva, Chunnakam 1971, Letter III, 17.3.71, p. 4/5. Especially piquant his remark on p. 6 over the plans to open Trinco to tourism: "You are proposing to provide, ... a 1000 acres of Konanathar's (the god of Trincomalee) territory to mini-skirted tourists and their male counterparts."

52 Personal communication.

The Karaiyars

In the described social set-up, the Karaiyars, a deep-sea fishing and pearl-fishing caste, were unusual: they were not considered quite as high-caste as the Vellalar, but definitely not a low caste, since, like the Vellalar, they are not subject to the kutimai-atimai differentiation which could be considered a parallel to the left-hand-right-hand distinction of Tamil castes in India.⁵³ They form the second largest caste in the Tarnil areas (Vellalar 50%, Karaiyar 10%, all others are single digits⁵⁴). Their origin and time of immigration to Sri Lanka are uncertain, one of their traditions connects them to the Vijaya myth.⁵⁵ They seem to have come as merchants and fishermen, and were often known as soldiers or mercenaries of the Tamil kings, and frequently fighting in factions against Vellalar interests.⁵⁶ The Karaiyars' myths of origin clothe them with high status and military prowess.⁵⁷ They had a reputation of toughness and never accepted the low status the Vellalars might have wished to confer on them.⁵⁸ Again according to Raghavan the Karaiyar were supposed to be the original inhabitants of Mannar and to have possessed that island in olden times.⁵⁹ Their history in Mannar is uncertain, since except for the Munneswaram Puranam no chronicles exist.⁶⁰ Moreover, the west was always a bone of contention between Tamil and Sinhalese rulers because of the pearl fishery⁶¹ and also an area of considerable mixture of both ethnic groups.

The stream of Karaiyar immigrants continued until comparatively recent times, and they came both from different places of origin from the Vellalars (often Tutikudi and Karaikudi) and dispersed more widely. Indeed, the bulk of their caste seems to have come as fishers as late as the

53 Pfaffenberger, *Caste in Tamil Culture*, op. cit., p. 39.

54 Ibid., p. 47.

55 *The Taprobanian*, vol. I, 1885-86, p. 89.

56 *Varya Patal*, op. cit., p. 40/42; 143.

57 Ibid., p. 139/140-41.

58 This corresponds to what M. Roberts, op. cit., p. 48-57 writes about the Karava and their position in the caste system of the Sinhalese. There are, as we will see, more decisive similarities between both groups which justify to derive them from the same area of India.

59 M. Raghavan, *Tamil Culture in Ceylon*, Colombo 1972, p. 58.

60 K. Indrapala, *Dravidian settlements in Ceylon and the beginnings of the Kingdom of Jaffna*. Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of London 1965 (unpubl.), p. 384; anon., *Trinco in 1820*, PRO CO 54/28 mentions that the pearl fishers still come from the subcontinent.

61 Indrapala, op. cit., p. 388.

15th to 16th centuries. In the Sinhala areas, they Sinhalized and became reconstituted as the Karavas.⁶² A close connection to the Nayakar of Tanjavur whom they served as fishers and as mercenaries seems to have existed.⁶³ They are also mentioned fairly extensively in the sources on the last years of the independent Jaffna kingdom. Queyroz who describes the years of Portuguese onslaught on Jaffna repeatedly mentions them as a warlike tribe or caste who commanded the loyalty of the fishers⁶⁴ and as the most serious adversaries of the Portuguese. The Karaiyar captains were feared most by them, and they were the ones who rebelled both against the last Tamil king Cankili II. and Portuguese rule.⁶⁵ Portuguese, Dutch and English sources list them commonly as Carreas or Careaz (fishermen). Baldaeus in the 17th century lists them among the influential classes of Christians together with the Madapallis and Vellalar.⁶⁶ The 'Karaiyar leaders' were so famous that the conditions to make Cankili II. a governor under the Portuguese included the interdiction of any contact with the Karaiyar leader.⁶⁷ That this was a necessary provision was shown when not only the Jaffna nobles withstood Cankili with the help of Karaiyar bodyguards, but when the latter himself hired Karaiyar soldiers to help him against the Portuguese.⁶⁸

In the 16th century, the Portuguese converted a sizeable number of them in Goa and brought them as pearl divers to Mannar.⁶⁹ Casie Chitty mentions their conversion to catholicism in 1543 in Mannar and the subsequent massacre by Cankili.⁷⁰

Long after Cankili had been defeated and killed by the Portuguese, it was the Karaiyar who continued the revolt against foreign rule for four years with the help of the Nayak of Tanjavur.⁷¹ Many later writers ack-

62 Roberts, op. cit., p. 388.

63 Mututampippillai, loc. cit., p. 54.

64 Fr. Fernao de Queyroz, *The Conquest (Temporal and Spiritual) of Ceylon*, Lisbon 1688, translated by Fr. S. G. Perera, S.J., Galle 1929, p. 628ff.

65 Ibid.

66 Baldaeus, *Jaffnapattam*, Colombo 1816 (reprint of the English translation of 1704, A short account of Jaffnapattam in the island of Ceylon), p. 51.

67 Nanappirakacar, op. cit., p. 155.

68 Ibid., p. 156/57.

69 Raghavan, op. cit., p. 58.

70 Simon Casie Chitty, *The Ceylon Gazetteer*, Kotte 1834, p. 155.

71 Nanappirakacar, *Yalppana Vaipava Vimarcanam*, loc. cit., p. 161f; a similar description also in Veluppillai, op. cit., p. 58-60, where he says that the generals in the Tamil army were generally Karaiyars.

knowledge the leading role of the Karaiyar in revolts against the Portuguese and other foreign powers.⁷²

Burnand has this to say with regard to the reputation and influence of the Karaiyars:

"... and it may be with truth said that all turmoils and insurrections caused by the other castes or Nations in the country, cannot be of great importance or be attended with bad consequences as long as those fishermen and Chiwadekarras ... do not meddle themselves therewith ..."⁷³

Then follows an interesting remark:

"All these fishermen pretend to have come over to this country with the Portuguese from Colombo and Negombo but from what can now be seen it appears rather that the greatest part have come from Jaffnapatam."⁷⁴

Casie Chitty compares them explicitly to the Jews: they have no commensality with other castes, but they do not consider themselves in any way included in the Tamil ranking system.⁷⁵

The history of the Karaiyar is thus intriguing, if a bit opaque. They have a tradition of self-confidence, courage, revolt, and rebellion against outside forces, and as hired soldiers or bodyguards. Their military past and their claim to higher status than they enjoy at present is quite obvious. They deliberately stood somewhat apart from the caste system of Jaffna, not aspiring to compete with the Vellalars, but not accepting their claim to domination either. Petty squabbles about ranking and hierarchy were beneath them. They considered themselves something special. But attempts by the Vellalars at holding down the Karaiyar had been difficult and were widely resented. This feeling of standing apart was reinforced by the fact that under the Portuguese in spite or because of their former enmity many among them converted to Catholicism. The gap was widened when certain strata among the Vellalar turned to Protestantism in the 19th century. A denominational rivalry developed alongside the

72 C. Ponnucamippillai, *Yaippana Vaipavam* (Events in Jaffna), Jaffna 1927 (2nd ed., first ed. 1916), p. 36 and K. Kanapatippillai, *Ilankai Val Tamilar Varalaru*, (History of the Tamils living in Ilankai), Peradeniya 1956, p. 34f.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 247.

caste one, and this denomination-caste rivalry seems in many cases to have overridden the Christian-Hindu antagonism.⁷⁶ Several witnesses giving evidence to the Donoughmore Commission in 1929 testified to caste suppression and injustice, particularly the catholics in the Mannar region who were by definition Karaiyar.⁷⁷ In the elections under the Donoughmore Constitution in the 30s the Karaiyar were virtually the only caste lower than the Vellalar who not only voted at all, but whose vote also had a significant impact. As Jane Russell shows this was due to their better organisation in the Catholic Diocesan Union and consequent self-confidence:

"...the Karaiyar or fishing caste had to a great extent engineered its emancipation from Vellala domination by the 1930. ... the Karaiyar had used the vehicle of the Catholic Church to free themselves from the tammels of caste obligation."⁷⁸

The catholic paper, *Catholic Guardian*, catered mostly to a Karaiyar readership and advocated caste reform, and appeals in this paper carried weight with the community. The Karaiyar were thus the only non-Vellalar caste which the conservative elite of Jaffna could not afford to cold-shoulder.⁷⁹ The Karaiyar vote was responsible for voting in A. Mahadeva in Jaffna and N. Selvadurai in Kayts, because they either promised to look after Karaiyar grievances or, as in the second case, because he was a Christian. Likewise, they supported G.G. Ponnambalam in Point Pedro.⁸⁰

Apart from fishing and pearl-diving, occupations they still adhere to today, and soldiering, the Karaiyar in the nature of things became famous as smugglers especially in times of custom restrictions and monopolies and shortages. In recent decades, Karaiyar have taken to challenge the Vellalar preeminence in the education and business fields,

76 Cf. e.g. *UT* 26.4./10.5.1849, 28.4.1923 (where separate representation for Christians is rejected with the argument this was a trick by the catholics to strengthen their influence!), Riots and disputes between protestants and catholics are already reported in 1829, Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

77 MSS. Ind. Ocean, Nathan 606, Bodleian Lib. (Rhodes House) Ceylon Constitution Committee, Evidence 1927-28, 33rd sitting (124), evidence by G.A. Northern Province Russell; cf. also Memorandum of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils' Service League, *op. cit.*

78 Jane Russell, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution 1931-47*, Ceylon Historical Journal 26, Colombo 1982, p. 13.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 81-84.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 83/84.

and many 'K-castes', as they are widely known in Jaffna, are today famous in the academic world.

The Emergence of the Militants

Into the social rigidity of Jaffna the militants brought not only their view of a separate Ilam, but also their vision of a juster society. The militants can be termed in some way the successors of the Jaffna Youth Congress which had come to an inglorious end in the late 30s, cherishing the same ideals of national liberation and a vague socialist ideology. But where the JYC had faltered, the militants were supremely successful. How did this come about? A university education and a position in the civil service were regarded by the Tamils as the only possible career and a traditional fief. A host of well-educated and bright young men were in 1972, after 'Standardisation', standing at the university gates and not being let in, and that created vast frustrations.⁸¹ It was this measure that really hit the youth hardest, and it can be said that it triggered the subsequent violent conflict, because it virtually foreclosed their future: until now, the Tamils had found their living mainly in government service and the professions, and education was said to be Jaffna's major 'industry'.

'Standardisation' was introduced in the education system in 1972, and it can be shortly described as a measure giving the Sinhalese a bonus on their school leaving grades in the university entrance tests.⁸² It was openly devised to reduce the 'disproportionate' percentage of Tamils in higher education and civil service jobs. It has been plausibly argued that this measure was introduced to soothe the feelings of those Sinhalese who had participated or sympathised with the JVP (Janatha Vimukti Peramuna) revolt of 1971, a movement of educated, but underprivileged Sinhalese youth, so that after the whole-sale killing of the rebels, the government could be seen to be doing something for the Sinhalese, a sort of 'carrot-and-stick-approach'.⁸³

81 Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, The Tamil 'Tigers' in Northern Sri Lanka: Origins, Factions, Programmes, in: *Internationales Asienforum*, 17 (1986), 1/2, pp. 63-85, p. 65.

82 For Standardisation see C.R. de Silva, Weightage in University Admissions: Standardisation and District Quotas in Sri Lanka 1970-1975, in: *Modern Ceylon Studies*, vol. 5, 1975, S. 152-178.

83 Personal communication.

Education and its significance

To understand why Standardisation hit the Tamils as it did, we have to look at the role of education in the Jaffna context. In a way we can say that militancy arose primarily over denied education possibilities. Education was in the 19th century mainly a concern of the Vellalars, yet it quickly filtered down to other castes, notably the Karaiyars. This necessitates a discussion of the rank value of education in the Jaffna social system and consciousness. R. Perinbanayagam has demonstrated this most lucidly.⁸⁴ He doubts the commonplace that the ecology of Jaffna was so poor that people were forced to take up education which was offered by the missionaries. He says in that case why did people stay in Jaffna for centuries and not move on. On the contrary, he perceives a strong demand for education at the beginning of the 19th century and asks how this came about. He sees this in the changes in status, occupation and land, i.e. the social set-up English rule brought about. He mentions the Karaiyars and Paravas as two groups who took advantage of the privileges their religion offered them under the foreigners and challenged the Vellalars who were forced to react. The Vellalars tried to make up for lost status by taking advantage of the opportunities the cash economy offered. And the quickest way to cash in the Jaffna context was through education and civil service as clerks, lawyers, doctors, etc. Thus, the high castes used education to maintain status, the low ones to gain it. Education took on the character of entrepreneurial activity which it has retained till today:

"English and Vellalahood was the path to fame and fortune."⁸⁵

This explains the demand for education in Jaffna, and we can now even better understand the fury over the equal-seating ruling discussed earlier. To attain or maintain this high status, Perinbanayagam says, Jaffna parents were and are prepared to make huge sacrifices like other entrepreneurs for their industries. To send just one family member through university they ruin themselves, because the crock of gold at the end of

84 R.S. Perinpanayagam, *The Social Foundation of Educational and Economic Activity in Jaffna, Sri Lanka*, in: *Kailasapathy Commemoration Volume*, eds. M. Chitraleaga, K. Shanmugalingam, S. Maunaguru, Jaffna 1988, p. 83-100. In the following I refer to this article unless otherwise indicated.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

the rainbow is waiting. This, however, also puts an enormous responsibility on the boy who is chosen to go through this process:

"... his sisters' happiness, his father's religious duties and obligations, as well as the emotional and affective commitments of the family, all seem predicated on success in examinations, universities and careers."⁸⁶

Education is thus an investment that demands discipline, dedication, order, self-control, austerity, virtues, which are also displayed by the militants. It is easy to see that, if this industry and investment opportunities are threatened as they were by Standardisation, the effect on society as a whole must be powerful, but especially on the very persons, on whom all the hopes of returns rest. If they are denied these returns, their frustration must be enormous. Not only this: an avenue of upward mobility is closed at the same time.

Coupled with the new Constitution of 1972 which was rejected by all Tamil parties because it virtually excluded them from having any say in the affairs of the country, it brought about the militant backlash.

A Future Foreclosed

Economic circumstances therefore were very different this time round: the rebellious lower-middle class youth of the 70s did not have the prospects of its forefathers, and there were no civil service and professional jobs waiting at the end of the road, but unemployment. The militants came from roughly similar backgrounds as earlier political radicals, but their future was very different. Further, the economic climate of the 70s had also changed the outlook for the lower castes: with the decline in professional and civil service jobs had come a corresponding upsurge in the fortunes of artisans, engineers, vegetable farmers etc., and the formerly poor low castes saw chances of economic and social mobility, especially in Jaffna town proper.⁸⁷ They began to gain confidence and resist the attempts of the Vellalars to hold them down. The Vellalars had to come to terms with this. The FP and the Tamil United Liberation Front, a coalition of Tamil parties founded in 1972 (TULF), tried to

86 Ibid., p. 89.

87 Amita Shastri, *The Material Basis for Separation: The Tamil Eelam Movement in Sri Lanka*, in: *JAS* 49, 1, 1990, p. 46-77, esp. p. 67.

solve the problem by coopting the lower castes as token Harijans, but for the younger ones, who had been weaned on a more liberal diet, this was not enough. They included the whole of Ceylon in their sweep and advocated cooperation with the Tamil lower castes as well as with the Sinhalese. This was a broadly leftist programme evolved in the 50s by writers and journalists in the Progressive Writers' Union, like Kailasapathy and Sivathamby who saw themselves as Ceylon Tamils in a Ceylonese nation. They and many among the low castes shunned the Vellalar-dominated TULF altogether, finding their home in the leftist parties and to some extent in the United Front government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), when artisans and small farmers thrived. Only in the 80s was this link broken with increasing Sinhalese oppression and the equalisation of society by the militants.

A general feeling of threat for the Tamils and discontent with things as they were indicate an amount of social and generational crisis not encountered earlier. It is this generational conflict - which in the late 60s was also a feature of the West - that, coupled with other factors, helps to explain the virulence and bitterness of the movement. The elders taught the youth things which they did not expect to be taken seriously, but which the youth took in dead earnest: the animosity between Tamils and Sinhalese as well as the promise of a bright future on condition of good behaviour. But when school ended, all the wise teachings of the elders and their promises could not help a vast mass of youth sliding into unemployment and thus losing their grip on the meaning of life. As the German historian Hans Mommsen expressed it with regard to the rebellion of the youth in Europe and especially in Germany in 1968: socially prestructured authoritarian forms were not filled by the given authorities, the authority of the man and the office were no longer congruent; this led to a severe loss of credibility on both sides and thus to the search for alternative forms of achieving one's aims and recover a meaning in life.⁸⁸ The elders could never keep their promises, they could neither get a seat in the university for their young nor could they offer them more rights as Tamils. This did not affect them, they were in clover, but it affected a new generation, to whom had been said, that learning and obedience will solve all and as long as you are good and listen to your elders, all will be well. But in the end, nothing was well: the future appeared uniformly bleak.

88 Hans Mommsen, *Die Last der Vergangenheit*, in: *Stichworte zur 'Geistigen Situation der Zeit'*. 1. Band: Nation und Republik. edition suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1979, p. 166.

New ways of Competition for old Aims

The frustration born out of missed educational opportunities and a future that collapsed led the Jaffna lower middle class to violence together with a realisation that benefits of economic development, if it happened in their regions at all, did not go to them, but to the Sinhalese.

This frustration is highlighted and illustrated in the individual biographies of many leading members of the militants, whatever their caste status. A feature common to many is that they all left school very early, after GCO or A-levels⁸⁹, and, instead of studying, joined the movement. Thus, most of the LTTE members have known no other profession than fighting, since, as one of them put it graphically, out of 20000 who passed their A-levels, only 50 or 60 Tamils got into university. It was thus seen as more profitable altogether to turn militant. Though not all of them were school drop-outs (Perumal, a member of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and erstwhile chief minister of the Provincial Council, was a lecturer in economics in the university of Jaffna, and Eelam Revolutionary organisation of Students (EROS) was originally a students' movement before it turned militant), the feeling of impending doom is noticeable for all. Some scholars have here seen a strong similarity to the JVP, and it has to be said, that here the comparison holds, since the JVP membership was also recruited from a lower middle class that had acquired some education, but not enough to enter university and the concomitant heights of power. Militancy in both cases was competition by other means.

One other very interesting fact should be noted: the leaders and prominent members of the LTTE come from one particular area in Jaffna, namely Valvettiturai, a fishing and smuggling village on the coast, or the surrounding district Vattamarachi. Valvettiturai has since time immemorial been a fishing centre and a harbour famous for smuggling and the audacity of its Karaiyar fishing caste, though Vellalars do live there as well. The LTTE is one of the few groups with not only a mixed-caste membership, but also with Karaiyar leadership. This is truly unusual.⁹⁰ If we believe the LTTE mythology, it was more or less fortuitous that the mantle of leadership fell on the Karaiyar Prabhakaran. The

89 General Certificate of Education (corresponds to 'Mittlere Reife') and Advanced Level (corresponds to 'Abitur').

90 For a detailed discussion of the composition of the groups, see Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The LTTE - Armed Struggle for Identity*, in press.

forerunner of the LTTE was a group called Tamil New Tigers (TNT), loosely connected to TULF and founded in 1972, renamed LTTE in 1976.⁹¹ The LTTE split in 1980 into PLOT (People's Liberation organisation of Tamil Eelam) and LTTE, PLOT taking with it the Vellalar stratum,⁹² so that the LTTE became a Karaiyar-led and dominated group. The influx of low-caste cadres from the East has ensured that it is more representative of Tamil society as a whole than most other groups.

The LTTE has in spite of its enmity to today's TULF the strongest links with and most vivid consciousness of, political tradition and development: it is the only group which explicitly refers to S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the founder of the FP, as 'Tantai Celvā', Father Selva and as the founder and inspiration of the Ilam freedom struggle. He laid the historical basis for the fight for Ilam and is thus considered the historical predecessor of the Tigers. The true successor of Chelvanayagam and the FP is the LTTE:

"The gun in their hands, the fire of freedom in their hearts, arises the third generation: Tantai Chelva's heroic poliaes cannot be bartered away, in strength his heirs rise up ... LTTE members have come into his heritage on the battlefield."⁹³

The LTTE emerges more than anything else as a strong 'national', traditional or classical Tamil heroic band of warriors which is widely accepted by the population not least because of their strict discipline and conduct. They base their claim for an independent Ilam as much on racial and national ancient glory and present suppression as on Lenin's justification of national struggle and separation in compelling circumstances.

The name of the group, 'Tigers', is another telling point: Asked why 'Tigers'. LTTE spokesmen said, that it was the old royal emblem of the Chola kings. Those were the great imperial kings under whom Tamil culture and Tamil power flourished and became great. It is interesting that the Cholas are singled out as models. though there were three Tamil or Dravidian kingdoms: Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas. The Cholas, however, became the mightiest and actually conquered Sri Lanka! And as we saw, it was under the Cholas, that 'respectable' settlers came from India to

91 Hellmann-Rajanayagam, op. cit.

92 There are sources, though, that maintain that at the beginning, PLOT was a truly low-caste group.

93 *Viravenkai* (Brave Tiger), an LTTE-Newspaper, March-Apr. 86, p. 8.

Jaffna: Vellalar, Vanniyar, Velaikkarar, Karaiyar. Therefore the LTTE wants to model itself on them.

The continuity shows perhaps most clearly in the person of the leader of the LTTE, V. Prabhakaran, a Karaiyar from Valvettiturai. His father was a small government clerk, and Prabhakaran the youngest of 4 children. Prabhakaran joined the Tamil Ilainar Peravai (TIP), a group loosely connected to TULF in 1972 after just seven years of school before his GCO and during the Standardisation debate. Prabhakaran was elected leader by default since after the arrest of some leaders, there was nobody unincriminated enough to take up this position.⁹⁴ That this was considered a stopgap measure is made clear by the sequel. When Uma Maheswaran, a Vellalar, joined the movement in 1977 Prabhakaran turned the leadership over to him, because he was a Vellalar and a surveyor, i.e. had a university education. This is the approved version according to LTTE, but even if we assume that Prabhakaran was pressured to relinquish the leadership to Uma, as seems likely, the reasons given for this move are highly illuminating. He was first a Vellalar and second an 'educated' man. The fact that this is probably the rationalisation of a leadership fight need not detain us here. What is important is the direction this rationalisation took: Uma was not chosen for his leadership or military qualities, but for his caste and examination results. That Prabhakaran must have had a strong faction of loyal Karaiyars who did not like this state of things is borne out by the events following, the expulsion of Uma in 1979 and the split of the movement in 1980. This led to entrenched factional fights between Uma's PLOT and LTTE which even spilled over into India. However, Prabhakaran retained the domination of the movement, and has in time become a legend in his lifetime both because of his militant actions and the Robin-Hood-style and Wild-West myths that grew up around him. This was due, not least, to the retreat of the LTTE into the jungle whenever the odds lay against them. This retreat into the jungle is a time-honoured motif in the history and literature of Jaffna. However, because of his Karaiyar background, many high-caste Tamils, even young ones, are very ambiguous about him: admiring his military prowess, but having doubts about his leadership qualities. But for his supporters, he is the young warrior-lover of the heroic age, epitomised by the Purananuru poems, resurrected. He arouses fierce allegiance among his followers because he is more than anything else a traditional Tamil hero-ascetic: married since 1984, with two children,

94 Interview with Kittu (Sathasivam Krishnakumar), in London, March 1991.

fiercely faithful, practicing and exacting strict discipline by shunning alcohol, tobacco, stimulants and forbidding his men to have extra- or pre-marital affairs, norms of male conduct and dominance which are based on and justified with traditional Tamil classics.

In a revealing interview to the *Hindu* in Sept. 1986 Prabhakaran listed the men he considers his models, and great Marxists were, despite the impression given in the LTTE pamphlets', conspicuously absent among them: Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh (who threw a bomb into the LC in Delhi and was executed in the 30s), Tiruppur Kumaran, a weaver from the town of Tiruppur who protested against government measures, took part in strikes and demonstrations in the 30s and was shot by the police,⁹⁵ the Mahabharata heroes like Karnan and Bhima; Napoleon, etc.

In spite of the Marxist rhetoric, the appeal of the LTTE is rather targeted to a petty bourgeois lower middle class who is susceptible to national arguments on a basis of survival and economy: LTTE is the only group which can really prove to have grassroots support and influence. They can still claim the support of large sections of the Tamils who see them as the only line between them and annihilation. This is indeed a very powerful argument. Here also lies the answer to the often-heard question why it is the LTTE that has the strongest support among the population in spite of its harsh regime. The answer seems to be, not only does the LTTE play on the traditional symbols and feelings of Tamil heroism, but on that of a just and equitable society led by royal or warrior patronage as well. They are seen as the legitimate, traditional protectors of the people, because their rhetoric runs along lines which are indeed traditional and deeply entrenched and thus strike a related chord among the population: we protect *you, your nation, your honour, your women*. This is not the rhetoric of a Marxist grouping but that of a feudal chivalrous class of warriors who always existed in Tamil society and literature who stand between the people and injustice from high up. This more than anything else reveals the true power basis of the LTTE: not a Marxist ideology, but the ancient glory of a people and a race. The socialist stance, so sincerely it is peddled, is at best a thin veneer over a profoundly indigenous and nationalistic movement. Yet at the same time, aims of equality and social justice have been realised best by this movement which is both mixed-caste and mixed religion. And that

95 For details of this incident see Eugene Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*, Madras 1986, p. 132 and 299fn.

exactly is the secret of its success: the undoubted support of the movement depends on this mixture of deep loyalty to the culture and history of the Tamils and an attempt at social reform. LTTE has even announced an official Heroes' day on 27th November.⁹⁶ They also have their own TV-station. The videos and cassette tapes they produce on the struggle are sold and rented in video outlets all over London. In late 1990, they turned the Jaffna Fort into a museum and a monument to the spirit of sacrifice. On public holidays the population is allowed to view it for a nominal fee. No other group could match the rhetoric and the patriotic approach and none other has consequently been very successful.

In the late 80s the LTTE started efforts to reform society and make it more equal, though by decidedly nasty means. Social change for them like political power and redistributive justice emanated from the barrel of a gun. In consonance with Hobsbawm we could probably call them social bandits, if there was not the added component of the fight against the Sinhalese. The obverse of this ideal is, however, that traitors to this ideal have to be punished, and the LTTE was consequently not choosy when dealing with its enemies. 'Lamp-post deaths' where the victims are hung from lamp-posts, became notorious, like those of three TULF members in Jaffna in 1984. These were aimed at alleged betrayers and defrauders. They were punished as much for fraud and embezzlement as for failing to redistribute their wealth to the poor. Politically disastrous and morally reprehensible as these acts may be, they can be seen as crude attempts to eliminate high caste suppression of the lower classes and castes. The levies and excises extracted by the LTTE can likewise be seen as a crude form of redistribution: visa fees, demands of gold in compensation for young men not joining the movement, land and houses that have to be written over to the LTTE when the last member of a family leaves the peninsula, all these measures are aimed at and apply to the well-to-do Vellalar middle-class of Jaffna, who are thus forced to their fury to finance the movement. The same applies to the taxes levied especially from Muslim traders in the East and the wholesale expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna in late 1990: it was aimed at a total restructuring of society and could point to a resurrected trade rivalry with the Muslim which is, especially in the East, ages old.⁹⁷

96 Peter Schalk is a present working on this topic.

97 The reason given by Kittu and the LTTE papers was, however, slightly different: they were sent away for their own safety and could return when the situation had changed.

In and through the LTTE, the Karaiyars thus retained their old reputation of prowess, independence, and violence. At the same time they, who were traditionally the low, hired mercenaries and bodyguards of kings and merchants, are now not only the protectors, but also to some extent the rulers of the people, though they always professed that that was what they did not want to be.⁹⁸ Their ideals, indeed, are traditional to such an extent, that the Soviet Union called them chauvinistic in the 70s in spite of their professed socialism.⁹⁹ It is precisely the Karaiyar who hark back to the glorious Tamil tradition and its reputation for splendour and heroism, of courageous warriors and brave mothers. And there lay the error of the Vellalars: they had to some extent gone beyond those ideals to a modern society in which, however, privileges and caste were fixed stars and where they needed the Karaiyars as an armed bodyguard. Too late they woke up to the fact that the Karaiyar were the only ones to take traditional Tamil ideals seriously, not only talking, but living them and at the same time combining them with 'modern' ideals of social justice, equal rights etc. They quite consciously provided the sense of identity and continuity for the youth that the older generation and especially the TULF were unable to provide. This made for a powerful combination. In the process the Karaiyars have become the new 'Kshatriyas' of Jaffna, if not in name, at least in function, and we have here maybe one of the purest examples of what Kulke terms 'Kshatriyaization'.¹⁰⁰ A mixture of old and new can be seen in the forms of administration and justice introduced by the LTTE: introduction of a police force, people's courts, which are obvious attempts to legitimise LTTE rule to the Tamils of Jaffna. 'Punishment' of traitors and criminals or a new legal system, both point to a concept quite well-known in Tamil culture: a just system of administration with equality for all, but at the same time a concept of justice both lofty and terrible. It refers back to the just ruler who is always accessible to his people, but merciless in his attitude to wrongdoers, whoever they may be. Examples are the mythical king Manuniticholan who had his own son crushed under the wheels of a carriage, because he accidentally killed a calf this way, or Neduncheliyan who commits suicide for having wrongly convicted Kovalan, the hero of

98 Prabhakaran did reject the offer to become chief minister.

99 Urmila Phadnis, *Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia*, New Delhi et al. 1989, p. 228.

100 Hermann Kulke, 'Kshatriyaization and Social Change: A Study in Orissa Setting', in: *Aspects of Changing India: Studies in Honour of Prof. G.S. Ghurye*, ed. S. Devadas Pillai, Bombay 1976, pp. 398-409.

the epic Cilappatikāram as a thief, though he could not know his error at the time.¹⁰¹

Their economic activities also show a stronger adherence to tradition than to Marxist economic theories. Left to their own devices after the break with TULF with little money and little sympathy, the movement evolved not only military strategies, but also ways and means of procuring weapons and life's necessities. This has probably given the movement the strength to survive till now. They acquired farms in the Vanni, and sold the produce. That was, however, a temporary measure. Nowadays young tigers are sent to India and overseas to study, mostly engineering and computer studies, skills which can be fed back into the movement and at the same time adhere to the established pattern of education as the most prestigious occupation for Tamils. The traditional preoccupation of Jaffna with education holds good even in the LTTE, in their reverence for 'educated' people and their efforts to 'educate' their own cadres. By training 'boys' to requirements and sending them for studies, they fulfill the aspirations of the Jaffna man and obviate the need for him to work in petrol sheds. Education has to be 'useful', in this case for the 'struggle'. Western technology is adapted to Jaffna conditions, and armament techniques reproduced under primitive conditions. In this atmosphere of emphasis on education, degrees and a civil service career it is little wonder that what is functioning most excellently in Jaffna is Tiger bureaucracy. These are traditional methods of rule.

If we see the economic activities of the LTTE in this light, we might indeed say that this is competition for resources or access to them with other means. These resources and the manner of using them are, however, firmly traditional, namely, education for success and survival. The economic activities stay within the framework of what is proper for a Tamil to do. They centre on education and property. The competition is directed as much against the Vellalar as against the Sinhalese.

The result of militant success has been precisely to enable young Tigers to adhere to traditional economic and professional activities entirely within the Jaffna social context. But the drive for education has in this case acquired a dynamic of its own, unrelated to reality.

101 In a recent article Radhika Coomaraswamy has drawn attention to this 'terrible justice' of the Tamils, untempered with pity: The 'justice' of the Tigers is equally untempered with pity or mercy. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Of Vijaya and Maruta. Reflections on Nationalist Discourse of Race and Dynasty, ICES Working paper for the 'Four Decades of Independence' workshop held at the S.L.F.I. from 11th to 13th August 1989, S. 25f.

A New System of Society?

JVP and TULF though for very different reasons and with very different aims fought one and the same enemy: the Sri Lankan establishment represented by the government. The LTTE, in contrast, fought a two-sided war, viz. against the government and its own Tamil establishment. It combined the approaches of the JVP and the TULF. In the former, it had the support of the Vellalar establishment, in the latter, this very establishment was the enemy. This explains the profound ambivalence of the Jaffna elite towards the armed struggle and the LTTE in particular. The LTTE filled the gap that had opened when the TULF forged ahead politically and from this mixture of old and new derived not only military, but also political and economic strength. Until the mid-80s, the Karaiyars stayed within a traditional framework of militancy, i.e. they fought, but rarely attempted to rule or consciously change society. But when the armed bodyguard ceased to be low-caste fighters who did the Vellalars' dirty work and began to try to mould society, that was quite a different matter. The Vellalar establishment could not allow this to happen. Like the JVP, it was the revolt of the underprivileged against the elite. But unlike among the Sinhalese, contradictions crept in because all sections of Tamil society were affected by Sinhalese repression and cooperation was forced upon them. In the face of the common threat a new integration of society, unthought of before took place which overturned old attitudes and habits. Caste society was shaken badly by the realisation that an age-old caste solidarity has broken down in favour of ethnic solidarity. This explanation furnishes a rather sinister interpretation for the denunciation of the LTTE by Sri Lankan Tamil expatriates: is it possible that they are of Vellalars who resent the climb of the Karaiyar? Is the Vellalar establishment just trying to save its position and privileges, and its sons from being enlisted in the secessionist war? When the LTTE seemed to afford protection from the Sinhala army, they were welcomed, but when they demanded sacrifices and social change, the establishment suddenly found itself in agreement with the government denouncing their atrocities and turning their views to more amenable, high-caste militant groups. The bodyguard had got above its station.

How successful has the LTTE been in its aims? It is holding the Sinhalese at bay, and seems to have transformed society. Right now, it would be impossible to return to the *status quo ante*. It was the war that has thrown up a new elite and a new leadership from among the forward of formerly disadvantaged groups. But this was seen as a war-time

measure, not meant to being carried over into more settled times. On a second level, the conflict has prevented the lower castes as a totality from asserting themselves, throwing them back onto a war-time alliance of Tamils against the Sinhalese, instead of an alliance of underprivileged Sri Lankans against privileged ones. The changes are very much on the surface. The new social ideals and the new society are really the old ideals and society in different garb. The changes are those that have occurred since at least the beginning of the century, the horizontal and vertical extension of traditional ideals. The new society is the old society, only more so. However, nowadays low castes do not 'slowly, slowly become Vellalar', but demand respect and equality in their own right as what they are. Yet the movement to disregard or abolish caste is a movement by the very young, and two, or even three, post-independence generations have grown and lived in Jaffna whom the world-wide movements for equality have passed by. In spite of Pfaffenberger's quaint comparison, the 1968 movement has not even been noticed by people of this author's generation in Jaffna who still cling to their concepts of a 'proper society' and whose greatest fear is that their children might be deprived of their education by the war, or step beyond caste boundaries in marriage. So, may this not be just another case of JYC? The social system might reassert itself, albeit maybe in a different form and maybe with the flexibility it had lost these two centuries being put back in.