

deadly combination of religious fanaticism and political villainy.

What is equally disturbing is the fact that Indian society and its political leaders have been unable, over the last few years when the mosque issue has been repeatedly raised, to discuss this on a rational, democratic basis and to arrive at a solution. In fact, all political parties, excepting perhaps those of the Left, have been prevaricating on this issue; they have been afraid to totally alienate the *Hindutva* vote. The recent decision of the government - to rebuild the mosque and to build a temple - is a symbol of this prevarication; even after the catastrophe, the government hesitates to stand firm on its secular basis and seeks instead to placate Hindu mobs. In essence, the assault on the Ayodhya mosque by the BJP and its allies, in defiance of court rulings, was an assault on the secular and democratic foundations of the Indian state.

In Sri Lanka, the majoritarian fundamentalism of Sinhalese-Buddhist extremists has repeatedly raised its head whenever attempts towards a political settlement

of the ethnic question are being seriously discussed. The *Sinhala Lakuna* or the *Dharmadvipaya* of today's Sinhala fundamentalists is exactly what the *Hindutva* of the RSS-VHP-BJP alliance means: the creation of a theocratic state for the ethno-religious majority through anti-minority violence.

It is perhaps due to some resilience in the secular political behaviour of the Sinhalese polity that the Buddhist *bhumiputras* have not yet managed to create religious mayhem in Sri Lanka, despite the inflammatory frenzy with which some Buddhist leaders have been appealing to Sinhalese masses. Some Sunday Sinhalese newspapers—notably, *Divayina*—have been in the forefront of spreading inflammatory propaganda, intended to create ethnic and religious hysteria among Sinhalese Buddhists. One may perhaps feel relieved to note that not a single political party has so far opened its doors to these messengers of ethno-religious hatred—the Amarasekeras, the Iriyagollas, the Jayasuriyas, and the Pannasihas.

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MESSENGERS OF PEACE OR CREATORS OF CHAOS

The Role of Teachers in the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict

[Part Two]

Sasanka Perera

Class Presentation of Teacher # 2:

The review session in the 'tutory' at Nugegoda, Colombo, followed a similar pattern—two one hour sessions per week. The content of the lessons and the purpose of the review was the same as in the previous class in Kandy. I retained the same interviewing rights and permission to sit in while the class was in session. The origins of Sinhalese and Tamils were established from the very outset, and as in the class in Kandy the myths of origin were based on the contemporary popular interpretation of the *Mahawamsa*. The exclusive nature of North Indian ancestry for the Sinhalese and the South Indian ancestry for Tamils was stressed.²⁰ Without much difference from the class in Kandy the establishment and destruction of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms were described while blaming the destruction on the Tamils, and reference was made to the present conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese as a continuation of a historical process of enmities.

At this point the only incidents of student participation occurred. Once again the students' contributions were mostly accounts of anti-Sinhalese atrocities committed by Tamil guerrillas which the students claimed they heard from personal sources and newspapers. The teacher also recounted some stories related to him by refugees he had met in a temple at Kotte. He observed that it was a pity that people who had led good lives had to become refugees in their own land. He also told the students that if the Tamils had genuine grievances they had to be looked into, but that the demand for a separate state as well as equal rights were out of the question. As the majority, the Sinhalese had a legitimate right to a larger share of the country's resources, Sinhala must always be the state language while Buddhism was now in its rightful place as the state religion, as in ancient times. Significantly, he stressed that it was not practical to pack off all the Tamils to Tamil Nadu as they have lived in this country for a long time. But he especially noted that the government must repatriate all estate Tamils and bring back the prosperity of the Kandyan Kingdom.



In the closing stage of the second session a student brought up the question of Indian intervention. The teacher made the following statements in regard to this observation:

This is simply a matter of history repeating itself; the Tamils destroyed our ancient cities, now at their instigation the Indians are repeating the process in the north and east of the country... Recent research has established that the grandfather of the founder of the Sinhala nation was a Sri Lankan and not a lion as the *Mahawamsa* claims or a North Indian with lion strength as others have interpreted (this revelation took me by surprise!). But for examinations you should abide by the *Mahawamsa* interpretation.

Interview with the Students of Teacher # 2:

My interview with this group of students was conducted on similar lines as the earlier interview. My revelations about the South Indian migrations of the Sinhalese were treated with distrust and the students told me that they had seen no such thing in any of their textbooks or in any other sources. One student noted that whether the Sinhalese originated from North India or the south was immaterial in the present context. He noted that today the North Indians and the Tamils in South India and Sri Lanka were enemies of the Sinhalese. While most students murmured agreement, one noted that the teacher's statement regarding new research proving that Prince Vijaya's grandfather was a Sri Lankan was quite significant. Two students mentioned that they had seen an article regarding this in the Sinhala newspaper *Divayina*.

The students were unanimous in their opinion that the Tamils were responsible for the troubles the country faced. Some even claimed that the upsurge in JVP activity was due to Tamil massacres in the north and that the JVP was a Sinhalese response to those atrocities. They also thought that the government and the military were not doing a competent job eliminating the Tamil problem. One female student mentioned that the army was also responsible for a large number of Tamils' deaths. Her cohorts retorted by saying that the army had no option and that if Tamils hurt Sinhalese, the army had a duty to retaliate. In response to my question whether that was not against the principles of Buddhism, one student said confidently that King Dutugemunu, who had killed many Tamils to reunite Sri Lanka and save the Buddhist religion, had apparently descended directly to heaven after his death. No one knew about Dutugemunu's purported respect for Elara (a Tamil). They were also not aware of the controversy that raged in Sri Lanka over the

alleged tomb of Elara ten years ago when it was claimed to be the tomb of Dutugemunu.

Concluding remarks made by the students were similar to those of the students in Kandy. They considered that Tamils have historically been the major cause of most problems Sri Lanka faced.

Interview with Teacher # 2:

As in the previous interview the teacher was interviewed in the absence of students. I reproduce below the relevant parts of the interview in translation:

Q: Do you accept the accuracy of history lessons without question?

A: Generally speaking, the accuracy of those lessons seems quite acceptable. But I wish new research findings such as the one about Prince Vijaya's grandfather being a Sri Lankan were included in the texts. That would make the lessons more interesting and show that we do not blindly follow the *Mahawamsa*.

Q: You can't be serious; the story in the *Mahawamsa* about Vijaya is a myth. The present argument is simply a new version of that myth made in the context of Indian aggression towards Sri Lanka.

A: You cannot disregard these things out of hand. Have you read the report of this new historical revelation?

Q: No. Where can I find it?

A: It was in all the papers. Perhaps you should read these things before calling everything written by Sinhalese historians myths.

Q: In addition to discussions in terms of the social studies lessons do you talk about your views regarding the ethnic conflict.

A: Of course, this is a problem that touches us all. As true patriots we have to tell the younger generation how these things started. Tamil people have grievances and they must be resolved. But they have to be realistic in their demands. This is our country. The Sinhalese came to this land first. They cannot expect to divide it. On the other hand, since we are the majority, we have to have a larger share in resource allocation.

Q: Do you think the security forces are doing a good job in Tamil areas?

A: Yes. There are a lot of deaths. But that is a consequence of war. They (Tamils) started it, they will also have to end it.

Q: Can you remember the Anuradhapura, Kent and Dollar farm massacres?

A: Oh yes. How can one forget those. One of my neighbor's relatives died in the Pettah bomb attack. You may not have been in the country when the Tamils bombed an Air Lanka jet and the Telecommunications Office. A lot of people — our people — died in these attacks.²¹ The terrorists had forewarned all the Tamils in these places to leave before the attacks. Some of our students saw the aftermath of these attacks. Those days, that was all we talked about. Everyone was very angry. Some students even assaulted Tamil employees in my school. I am not a violent man. But I couldn't blame them. You have to understand their emotions. It's their people who get killed.

Q: What about the entire Tamil villages the security forces have wiped out?

A: Well, that is a consequence of war. Besides, most of the military massacre stories in the north are exaggerated versions. I have talked to some people in the army and they say nothing of the sort has happened.

Q: You seem to have a lot of influence over your students. Do you feel that influence is a positive one?

A: They have to be shown the path. It is our duty.

As can be seen, overtly negative ideas are communicated by teachers while discussing Sri lankan history or contemporary politics. History as a subject has not been taught in Sri Lankan schools since the 1960s. Some observers have seen the teaching of history in social studies as inadequate, and there were rumors that the then Minister of Education had intended to re-introduce history as a subject to schools.²² Commenting on the issue, Premachandra Alwis noted that the teaching of history should not simply be the teaching of Sinhalese history.²³ However, so far history as not been re-introduced to schools, and discussions on history in Sinhala medium schools are incorporated within the subjects of Buddhism, Sinhala language and social studies. Buddhism and Sinhala language are taught from grades 1 to 10, whereas social studies are taught from grades 6 to 10.

In this context some writers have argued that students "mature" after grade 11 (inclusive of grade 12 and university) and hence subjects dealing with history should be taught only in these classes. This argument suggests that such a policy would minimize the negative effects of sectarian and incomplete history lessons as students will be able to evaluate facts themselves. This is not a sound argument. First, students do not suddenly "mature" from grade 11 upwards. Maturity is achieved as the result of a long process that is constantly influenced by what stu-

dents have learned before, in school and from society. Second, even after grade 11, and throughout university they remain in a segregated environment. Their teachers who lack proper training also come from similar backgrounds. If teachers play a negative role in inter-ethnic relations, that role does not cease at grade 11.

The Hidden Agenda of Teachers

In addition to teachers who teach Social studies, Buddhism and Sinhala language, others who teach sciences and Mathematics can also transmit signals detrimental to inter ethnic relations. Considering their lack of specialized training and will in handling the challenges of multi-ethnic Sri Lanka, all teachers are capable of transmitting potentially negative signals irrespective of the subjects they teach. These teachers may not get the opportunity to talk about Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in relation to what they teach, but regardless of what they teach, they can always talk about it. In many ways, the influence of this category of teachers is difficult to trace. The influence they exert on their students (in extra- academic matters) will be referred to as the "the hidden agenda of the teacher." With the intention of tracing this source of influence, teachers teaching mathematics, science and economics in grades 11 and 12 were interviewed.²⁴ Forty randomly selected students from their classes were also interviewed.²⁵ All interviews were conducted on an individual basis. The primary focus of the interviews was to determine the following:

1. What are the socio-political views of teachers regarding the ethnic conflict and history in general?
2. Do they discuss their opinions with students during classes even though lesson content has no relation to ethnicity and history?

Of the total sample of 20 teachers interviewed only one accepted that he was a Marxist. This information is significant for two reasons. First, given the brutal government campaign against the JVP in Particular and Marxists in general, This acknowledgement established that the teacher was not suspicious of me and likely to be more forthcoming in his/her answers. Second, except for JVP sympathisers, Sinhalese Marxists are generally sympathetic towards Tamil grievances and hence this teacher's interpretations were likely to be different from those prevalent in the Sinhalese society. He acknowledged that the Tamils had genuine grievances and the armed struggle was the result of not addressing those grievances. He stated that in theory the Tamils had the right of self-determination, but the creation of a separate state for them in Sri Lanka was not practical for security and economic reasons. He also thought that the government should immediately stop the military repression unleashed on Tamils (and Sinhalese in the South) and

open serious negotiations. He viewed the Sri Lankan education system as a 'capitalist' one which perpetuated the ethnic religious and caste differences which made it easier for corrupt regimes to govern the masses (as they were divided). Even though his ideas were quite different from the main-stream thinking he acknowledged that he did not discuss 'politics' in his grade 11 and 12 economics classes. His ideas were generally unpopular among his colleagues and students. Even in times of increased ethnic tensions he did not encourage discussions unrelated to the subject he taught. This was confirmed by the students in his class who claimed that while the other teachers discussed events of national importance, this teacher only concentrated on the lessons. If during times of tension some questions regarding the ethnic conflict or associated problems were raised, the teacher would reportedly say, "this is not a political science class. You learn economics here" and "we don't discuss these things here, go home and read the newspapers." The reluctance to discuss these issues obviously derived from his inability to express his opinions freely without facing severe state repression. This apparently "unfriendly" attitude had also made him one of the most unpopular teachers in grades 11 and 12.

The teacher candidly accepted that expressing his "honest" opinions would "get me into trouble with the authorities." So rather than airing some "dishonest" opinions he preferred not to discuss them at all. Here was a teacher who could have made a difference in at least one class in a minor way. But due to the unsettled nature of the times he had to put his ideals and beliefs on hold while the negative impact of the segregated education system increased. He mentioned that most of his friends in rural areas were also in the same predicament. A number of teachers and at least one university lecturer (as of September 1990) in the south have been arrested, killed or "disappeared" for allegedly indulging in subversive activities (This is in addition to others in this same professional category who had been victimized by the JVP itself).

Of the remainder of the sample (19), 15 discussed "politics in his class regularly. The remaining four said that they express their opinions on issues like ethnic conflict only when such things are brought up in class. Both students and teachers in grades 11 and 12 accepted that almost every day a certain amount of time is spent discussing some politically significant issue or incidents that have emerged recently. Students and teachers have easy access to Sinhala newspapers which publish reports of real or perceived atrocities committed by Tamil groups, various conservative opinions regarding the ethnic conflict, and status reports of successful military operations. There is more than adequate material for discussion. Both students and teachers showed a keen interest to add something new to these stories, heard from a friend or a relative.

The 15 teachers (teaching in Sinhala-medium Buddhist or Christian schools) who acknowledged that they discussed 'politics' regularly in classes regarded it their duty to enlighten students about what was happening in the country. They thought spending some class time on such discussions was justified. The Socio-political views of these teachers varied from hardline (unsympathetic) Sinhalese to marginally moderate (moderately sympathetic) Sinhalese views. However, the majority seemed to be hardliners. It is interesting and even disturbing to note that most opinions between hardliners and marginally moderates were consistent and similar. The only difference was that marginally moderates accepted that Tamils **might** have some grievances and that some military excesses could have contributed to the growth of terrorism in Tamil areas. The similarities in the ideas of hardliners and marginally moderates can be summarized as follows.

1. Tamils have to realize they are a minority; a minority cannot have the same rights as the majority.
2. All our problems are the results of terrorism by Tamil guerrillas and the separatist demand by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). All Tamils have sympathetic feelings towards terrorist and anti-Tamil riots are a national (Sinhalese) reaction against terrorist action.
3. This is the country of the Sinhalese. If Tamils want to live here, they must abide by the rules of the Sinhalese.
4. Tamils are group oriented and do not mix with the Sinhalese. This is another reason why they became a target of attacks. They help themselves and not us.

The four teachers who did not discuss politics unless the subject was brought up by students had similar ideas. The difference was that they were not enthusiastic or forceful in pushing their ideas on extra-academic matters. However, when they did, their ideas had an obvious Sinhalese bias. Interestingly, Catholic-Sinhalese teachers thought that their Tamil counterparts were using religion to de-stabilise the country, a practice which had given Catholicism a bad name among Sinhalese-Buddhists. This view symbolised the growing sensitivity among Christian Sinhalese about the definition of their ethno-religious identity.

The influence of these teachers (of mathematics, economics, sciences) is quite obvious. All students interviewed thought it necessary for teachers to share their opinions with them, and considered it part of the teachers' role. Students found it easier to relate to their teachers if they shared similar opinions on issues like ethnic conflict and religion. Two students from Matara claimed that their



mathematics teacher advised them to join the army to fight terrorists as a "patriotic duty". Two former students who were in grade 12 in 1983 said that their chemistry teacher commented that it was "unpatriotic" of the people in Galle (Galle and Matara are both towns located in the deep Sinhalese South and a traditional source of Sinhalese nationalism) not to have hit the Tamils as hard as in Colombo. A number of former students from a prominent Sinhalese Buddhist boys school in Colombo said that their physics teacher (in 1983) refused to teach (when the anti-Tamil riots began in July) and asked them to show their "jathyalaya" (patriotism) by going to the streets and attacking their enemies, the Tamils. I found at least eight students who heeded the advice of the teacher and joined in the riots. I personally encountered many students from Buddhist and Christian schools in Colombo who participated in the riots of July 1983. In one prominent Buddhist boys school a Tamil employee (a man who had been cleaning the school's toilets for over 14 years) was accused as a spy and assaulted. School authorities made no attempts to control the situation. The former students from a Catholic school in Colombo acknowledged that one of their teachers encouraged them to "take revenge" during the July 1983 riots.

It is quite clear that regardless of what they teach, certain aspects of the hidden agenda of all teachers have the potential to perpetuate ethnic animosities. While some teachers are known to have encouraged "passive tolerance" of other groups, such teachers were relatively few and hence the effect of their work could not be widely felt. The negative role Sinhalese teachers play in perpetuating and enhancing ethnic differences and animosities is doubly effective in the segregated environment in which they teach.

Tamil Teachers in the Ethnic Conflict

Interviewing Tamil teachers and students in the northern and eastern areas was not possible due to the prevalent state of war in those areas. Therefore some teachers and students who had fled to Colombo and Kandy in the Wake of increasing Indian assaults were approached. In addition, Tamil students and teachers from schools in the districts of Kandy and Colombo were interviewed. Overall these interviews proved to be more difficult and less systematic than the ones conducted in Sinhala. Some reasons were:

1. My inability to communicate in Tamil and the inability of most of the students and teachers to communicate in Sinhala or English.
2. Lack of interpreters or their inability.
3. The fact that I was a Sinhalese asking "awkward" questions made the interviewees uneasy.

For these reasons (especially the third) most interviews were conducted in groups which I thought would give the subjects more confidence to be as expressive as they could. Twenty five students and fifteen teachers were involved in these initial interviews. As a follow-up, four teachers and ten students were interviewed individually. This group was selected on two grounds; students and teachers who appeared to be comfortable in group interviews and individuals who were directly and personally introduced to me by mutually trusted friends. While the latter interviews were more penetrating, they also helped me verify the validity of group interviews.

My basic intention was to assess the teachers' opinions about the historical development of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, its present state and how the teachers transmitted their ideas to students. One of the four teachers taught Hinduism to grade 8 students while another taught 11 and 12. Of the ten students, Three were from grade 8 and four from grade nine. These seven students and two teachers (teaching Hinduism and Social studies) were from the Kandy area. The remaining two teachers were from Jaffna and Batticaloa. The remaining three students were all from grade 12 science classes in Jaffna. However, none of them were students of the last two teachers. The grade 11 and 12 teachers and students were not interviewed to ascertain whether the teachers directly influenced this specific group of students. But rather, these interviews were intended to demonstrate what other matters teachers discuss in classes other than their designated subjects, and how much teachers can help students in forming the ideas they had about the ethnic conflict and Sri Lankan history. Under conditions of war it is not always easy to find teachers and students from a single class or school because a refugee population is necessarily scattered.

In the group interviews both teachers and students (without exception) thought that learning Sinhala by Tamil students (and teachers) was a good idea. They also suggested that Sinhalese students should learn Tamil so that the two groups could communicate easily. Soon it was apparent that these positive ideas were expressed in group interviews only because people did not want to be labelled "racists" or "narrow minded." The initial idealism underwent some clear changes in individual interviews when opportunities were available to express one's ideas without restraint. Some Tamil students from the Kandy area were already familiar with some basic Sinhala. They considered that knowledge adequate for their daily needs. Those from Jaffna spoke no Sinhala at all. They considered that Sinhala was useful only if it would lead to economic benefits. When it was pointed out that they were refugees living in a Sinhalese area, I was told that they were with their relatives and there was no pressing need to learn Sinhala. Their main argument was that no Tamil should learn Sinhala if the Sinhalese showed no interest in learning Tamil.



Tamil teachers also changed their views between the group and individual interviews. Their final opinion was that it was not practical to teach Sinhala in Jaffna and Batticaloa schools (meaning schools in the north and east). They thought that students could learn it by themselves but that it should not be part of the curriculum. This was one of the most disturbing aspects to emerge from the research. The majority of Sinhalese and Tamil teachers did not like the idea of teaching Tamil and Sinhalese students each others' languages. Moreover, most students were not interested in learning anyway. This I believe will remain a major hurdle in any attempt to find a reconciliation. If teachers change their hardline attitude towards languages, it will be easier to persuade students to learn each others' languages. The indifference of teachers and educators has been one of the major problems confronting the minor attempts that were made to teach Tamil and Sinhala to students of opposing ethnic groups (Schwarz 1983: 13, Nadesan 1971:91). The refusal of Tamil teachers and educationists to introduce and teach Sinhala in Tamil schools (Nadesan 1971:91) has contributed significantly to intensifying ethnic conflict.

The teaching of history in these schools has played a similar role. This is mainly the result of misconceptions that have been transmitted in the name of history. We have already seen how this process takes place in Sinhala-language schools. Interestingly, or perhaps predictably this same process is duplicated in Tamil-language schools with the same negative consequences. However, there is one significant difference. Tamil-language lesson plans and textbooks designed by the Ministry of Education and published by the department of Educational publications (like their Sinhalese counterparts) contain no specific anti-Sinhalese sentiments. They simply avoid talking about Sinhalese culture and people with very few exceptions. This applies in teaching the Tamil language and Hinduism. When it comes to Social studies what is mostly presented is a Sinhalese version of Sri Lankan history despite some allusions of moderation... a history of conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. It is here that Tamil teachers make their most significant contributions to building prejudice. By their own admission (according to both students and teachers) the most intense and extended discussions and teaching sessions are centered around the history sections.

All students and teachers without exceptions observed that the official history lessons (in social studies) which

had to be learned and which the teachers had to teach, were biased. But these lessons had to be learned and taught for the simple purpose of passing examinations. For both students and teachers this was a bitter experience and it was not surprising that all teachers interviewed thought that it was their duty to show the students reality as it was.²⁶ In this light the time spent and the interest shown in reinterpreting Sri Lankan history, even though it had no practical value in terms of formal education (eg. passing examinations) and employment generation, is not unusual.²⁷ Given the background of the teachers, (products of segregated education and segregated social existence) this reinterpretation was not objective but rather a biased Tamil version (Like the Sinhalese version). Tamil ethnic pride, cultural superiority and bravery were glorified. Most reinterpretations told of a history of violent conflict with the Sinhalese and a history of brave Tamil kings who valiantly fought against Sinhalese repression. The contemporary ethnic conflict was seen as the latest phase of a two-thousand-year tradition of fighting for Tamil independence.

The majority of Sinhalese and Tamil teachers did not like the idea of teaching Tamil and Sinhalese students each others' languages. Moreover, most students were not interested in learning anyway. This I believe, will remain a major hurdle in any attempt to find a reconciliation.

Within such a context of Tamil students, like their Sinhalese counterparts, do not get a rational picture of history or contemporary social existence. What is intriguing here is the remarkable consistency in the myths and symbols that teachers transmit to students. Unlike Sinhalese teachers, Tamil teachers do not have any "official" books to guide them. By their own admission they did not rely on any particular source for their information.

The students admitted that they learned some aspects of their history from their parents, but they made particular note of the fact that the ideas based on "new research" came mostly from their teachers. What has consistently been called "new research" contains some of the most ethnocentric elements in the process of Tamil reinterpretation of history, and helped most young Tamils to perceive their Sinhalese counterparts as enemies.

It is important to understand the nature of this "new research" and the significant role teachers have played in transmitting these ideas to students. From their parents, family and society in general the students have already learned of a "conflict-filled past" and they personally experience a violent present. The teachers give life, color and added respectability to these generalised notions. Similar to the Sinhalese claim based on the perception that they were "the first to arrive in the island," the Tamils also claim the whole island for themselves and assert that they were in Sri Lanka long

before the Sinhalese. All the students from Jaffna and the majority from Kandy explained that the Mahawamsa description of Devanam Piyatissa (who welcomed Buddhism to Sri Lanka) being a Sinhalese was wrong. It was claimed that he was a Tamil Hindu king called Devanapriya Theesan. Eight students claimed that the information came to them via their teachers. The remainder claimed that they read it in book as well as in Tamil guerrilla literature.²⁸ They also stated that these revelations were discussed among themselves as well as with their teachers. This particular trend indicated the pattern in which most materials relevant to the ethnic conflict were transmitted to the students. While some had access in the outer society, most learned about them from their teachers.

Upon enquiring what difference it makes whether Devanam Piyatissa was Tamil or Sinhalese, the opinions expressed by most students and teachers were mutually consistent. Their opinion was that it was important to establish the fact that Tamils were in Sri Lanka long before the Sinhalese, thereby gaining legitimate grounds to assert their rights.

Of the four teachers who were closely interviewed, three said the matter regarding Devanampiyatissa was Tamil or Sinhalese, the opinions expressed by most students and teachers were mutually consistent. Their opinion was that it was important to establish the fact that Tamils were in Sri Lanka long before the Sinhalese, thereby gaining legitimate grounds to assert their rights.

Of the four teachers who were closely interviewed, three said the matter regarding Devanam Piyatissa was brought to their attention by some of their colleagues. One said he read about it in the "new research findings" of Satchi Ponnambalam.²⁹ However, Ponnambalam had not presented any "new research findings." He, like most Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist writers, compiled a variety of new myths and reinterpreted old ones. Myth-making is the most vibrant aspect of the Tamil reinterpretation of history. The nature and reasons for myth-making has to be understood in the context of Sinhalese nationalist writings and the making of Sinhalese myths. Sinhalese myths appeared much earlier. The preponderance of Tamil political myths since the late 1970s was a political and nationalist ideology. By their very nature Tamil myths were created in opposition to Sinhalese myths. These myths were articulated and popularised by a

number of expatriate Tamil writers in the 1980s. What is surprising is that most of these writings appeared in English. Yet, Tamil-medium students and teachers are well aware of them. Even though I could not find any Tamil translations, it seems reasonable to think there were many, given the widespread knowledge and belief in these myths among students and teachers. It is also clear that teachers were a significant channel of spreading myths.

Let us return to the topic of Devanam Piyatissa. I pointed out to those who were selected (teachers and students) for the extended interviews that no clearly defined Sinhalese or Tamil ethno-cultural identities evolved until the 9th or even 12th century A.D. But Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka (probably) in 247 B.C. So one cannot with any degree of accuracy claim that the king was specifically Sinhalese or Tamil. I was politely reminded that this simply could not be. A number of defensive arguments (based deeply in myth and not fact) were introduced to defeat my arguments. I reproduce below (in summary) the collective arguments put forward by these teachers and students:

Myth-making is the most vibrant aspect of the Tamil reinterpretation of history. The nature and reasons for myth-making has to be understood in the context of Sinhalese nationalist writings and the making of Sinhalese myths, which appeared much earlier.

arguments (based deeply in myth and not fact) were introduced to defeat my arguments. I reproduce below (in summary) the collective arguments put forward by these teachers and students:

1. Tamils always had a distinct identity though the Sinhalese did not. Tamils of Sri Lanka are heirs to a great Dravidian³⁰ civilisation which has its roots in Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilisations. This civilisation spread to South India and as far as the whole of Sri Lanka. As examples they claimed that Sinhala place names like Matara and Panadura were corruptions of the Tamil names Maturai and

Panadurai. Sinhalese are seen as later invaders of the island or Tamils who changed their identity after adopting Buddhism. Whatever the variation, the Sinhalese are considered to lack pedigree as well as cultural refinement.

2. The Mahawamsa is generally considered a collection of myths. It has however been used by Tamil writers when expedient. Students and teachers also regularly exhibited this rather strange double standard. Ramayana and Mahabaratha are used as historical sources which they clearly are not. Like the Sinhalese in relation to the Mahawamsa the Tamils have used legends as empirical fact. The Ramayana is supposed to show an early Tamil presence long before the Vijaya (Sinhalese) invasion. King Rawana is described as a "Tamil Yaksha King."³¹

3. Kings generally accepted as Sinhalese (eg., Parakrama Bahu I) by most Sri Lankan historians are considered Tamil. This apparently shows the manner in which the Mahawamsa has distorted facts.

The knowledge of "history" as summarised above and transmitted to Tamil students does not discuss the cultural similarities between Sinhalese and Tamils or the long periods of cooperation which have existed between the two groups. This is consistent with Sinhalese historiography and myth-making.

Within the framework of this "knowledge" there is no reason or any way for young Tamils to relate to their Sinhalese counterparts except in opposition. To them in addition to the Sinhalese's lack of pedigree, they are seen as arch-enemies of the Tamils who have constantly tried to destroy the "great Dravidian race and culture" for over two thousand years. No reconciliation is seen possible with them in the present conflict. All these negative transmissions are made by teachers who have no training in handling the challenges of a plural society in the highly charged atmosphere of the segregated classroom. Given the hardened attitudes prevalent in their society, these teachers, like their Sinhalese counterparts, also do not have the will or much needed moral support to deviate from building prejudice.

With the type of knowledge outlined above, the average Tamil students assessment of the ethnic conflict and his conclusions are fairly predictable. Most students and teachers thought that the massacres of Sinhalese peasants in the north and east were regrettable. They thought

that it was an unavoidable consequence of the war. They pointed out that the Northern and Eastern provinces were the last remaining traditional homelands of the Tamils (the rest have been colonized by the Sinhalese and that no Sinhalese had any right to be there. So if the only way to reclaim the traditional homeland was to eliminate the colonisers, it had to be done. Tamils living in other parts of the country had a right to live in those areas because "all of Sri Lanka was former Tamil territory." Once again, as with Sinhalese teachers and their students, ideas among Tamils varied from hardline to marginally moderate. It must be borne in mind that in both groups hardliners predominated.

It is clear then, regardless of their respective ethnicities, Tamil and Sinhalese teachers play an active role in deteriorating relations between the two groups. It is equally clear that they have achieved this singularly inglorious achievement by defining and interpreting biased history, myths and symbols and communicating these ideas to their students. Finally, teachers have been helped in their negative role, by the school structure, the social background of teachers, lack of will and training, and the absence of national policy to use teachers as promoters of inter-ethnic understanding. Until Sri Lankan policy makers accept the reality of this predicament and evolve a rational and coherent national policy to reverse this trend, teachers will happily continue to play the negative role they play at present. It is a pity that Sri Lanka uses one of the most potent weapons against ethnic and other sectarian conflicts for precisely the opposite purpose.

Notes

20. Interestingly, the *Mahawamsa* itself does not refer to such a geographically or ethnically exclusive myth of origin for the Sinhalese. For what it is worth, the original myth connects the Sinhalese with the Veddahs (through Vijaya's first marriage to Kuveni) and South Indians (through Vijaya's second and "legitimate" marriage to a princess from **South Madurai**).
21. This has been claimed by many Sinhalese even though I was unable to find evidence to corroborate it.
22. *Divayina*, November, 13 1983/ H.G. Charles, *Divayina*, November 21, 1983.
23. *Divayina*, December 1, 1983.
24. The sample of 20 teachers was selected from Christian and Buddhist schools from the cities of Matara (Southern Province), Colombo (Western Province) and Kandy (Central Province).
25. The 40 students included both Christians and Buddhists.

26. The interviewed teachers thought that all their colleagues agreed on this matter. While this may sound like an exaggerated statement, on the whole I believe that it has more validity than would appear.
27. However, these reinterpretations would have been extremely useful for parallel examinations conducted by the LTTE!
28. While many statements could be traced in press releases and in foreign newspapers attributed to rebel sources, I was unable to locate organised reinterpretations of Tamil history among rebel literature.
29. See S. Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: National Question and the Tamil Struggle*, London 1983. p. 20.
30. Like the Sinhalese nationalists using the term "Aryan", the Tamil nationalists use the term "Dravidian" to denote an ethnic group rather than a linguistic group.
31. Twenty years ago in Sri Lanka Rawana was no one's hero. Today the Sinhalese also claim him as their own.