

ESSAY

Narrating Tamil Nationalism: Subjectivities and Issues

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I

Alfred Jeyaratnam Wilson, now regrettably with his maker, remains Sri Lanka's leading political scientist, with numerous books associated with his name. He had secured eminence as early as the 1970s, when attached to Peradeniya University, and this reputation enabled him to move to a Professorship at the University of New Brunswick around 1972. It was his considerable scholarly reputation that encouraged the president of Sri Lanka and leader of the right-wing United National Party, J.R. Jayewardene, to utilise his consultative services in the political negotiations and constitutional engineering that occurred in the period 1978–83. His participation was facilitated by K.M. de Silva, a confidante of the president as well as Wilson's long-time friend.

Such personal details, as we shall see, are relevant to any discussion of *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism. Its Origins and Development in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Hurst and Company, 2000). The point is that Wilson was one of the players behind the scenes of Sri Lankan politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as details provided in his own academic works indicate.¹ Wilson was selected by Jayewardene not only because of his constitutional expertise; but because he was also the son-in-law of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, who had broken away from the Tamil Congress and founded the Federal Party (FP) in 1948/49. Although Chelvanayakam died in 1977, Wilson's connections with the FP leadership rendered him a potential mediator. But being introduced into the centre of discussions by Jayewardene also placed Wilson in an invidious position in the eyes of young

¹ See A.J. Wilson, *S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and the Crisis Of Sri Lankan Nationalism, 1947–1977* (London: Hurst & Co., 1994), p.140ff; and A.J. Wilson, *The Break-up Of Sri Lanka* (London: Hurst & Co., 1988), p.224.

Tamil firebrands in militant Eelamist parties that were part of the scene in the northern reaches of the island between 1978 and 1983.

For our purposes, however, what matters is the fact that Wilson had access to intimate information on the politics of the Federal Party (1949–1972) and its subsequent incarnations as the Tamil United Front (1972–75) and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) (1975 *et seq.*).² In other words, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism* (hereafter *TN*) is enhanced by inside knowledge available to its author. A significant plank in the programme of these parties was the claim that the Sri Lankan Tamils had inhabited territories within Lanka for eons; thus this area was depicted by them as their ‘traditional homeland’. As K.M. de Silva observes: ‘in less than a decade of its first enunciation in 1949, [this] theory...became an indispensable and integral part of the political ideology of the Tamil advocates of regional autonomy and separatism’.³ As we shall see, Wilson has naturalised this understanding and presents it in ways that obscure its contentious nature to readers who are not familiar with the situation.

This is but one indication of the manner in which personal involvement generates a significant measure of partisanship in Wilson’s analysis. The bias is *underscored by bitterness*. Speculatively, I suggest two mainsprings for such sourness. One arises, quite understandably, from the shock and sadness—if not anger—which would have followed the pogrom against the Tamils living in the southern districts of Sri Lanka in July 1983.⁴ It is likely that several of Wilson’s friends were victimised and traumatised, even killed, during ‘Black July’ 1983.⁵ Secondly, that event and the ongoing conflict it precipitated undoubtedly compounded Wilson’s disillusionment with J.R. Jayewardene. Central to this response would have been the conviction that his advice had been discarded and that he had been used (or mis-used) by the president. Indeed, such charges dominate the analysis presented by Wilson in his earlier study, *The Break-up Of Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict*, published in 1988.

Wilson’s disenchantment does not invalidate *some* of the verdicts presented in that book, but it does encourage some excess.⁶ Critically, *Break-up* is organised as a

² Presented in his book *Chelvanayakam*. See esp. pp.60n, 64, 66, 106–7, 117 and 120–21.

³ K.M. de Silva, ‘Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka’, in K.M. de Silva (ed.) *Conflict and Violence in South Asia*, (Kandy: ICES, 2000), p.384.

⁴ The pogrom of July 1983 made me very angry. See Michael Roberts, *Exploring Confrontation. Sri Lanka: Politics, Culture and History* (Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), ch.12 and 13.

⁵ Cf. Roberts, *Exploring Confrontation*, ch.12. Also see E.M. Thornton and R. Niththiyananthan, *Sri Lanka. Island Of Terror. An Indictment* (England: Eelam Research Organisation, 1984); and V. Kanapathipillai, ‘July 1983: The Survivor’s Experience’, in V. Das (ed.), *Mirrors Of Violence. Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.321–44.

⁶ It would be tedious to detail all the statements that one could challenge, but for an instance of a preposterous claim, note: ‘Had their been no resistance from the Ceylon Tamils [to the policies of successive governments from 1947 to the 1970s] the traditional territories of the Tamils would have been rapidly “Sinhalsed”’. Wilson, *Break-up*, p.54.

charter for the Tamil struggles of that day. Its review of politics in the period 1947–1970s concludes: ‘The inevitable reaction has been the growth of Tamil nationalism and the increasing use of the gun in Ceylon politics’ (1988: 43). But Wilson does not stop there. By means of teleological determinism, he extends his thesis backwards to events dating back to 1918 (1988: 56–60).

Wilson’s partisan position could also be understood as a reaction to his spatial location when *TN* was drafted in the late 1990s. He was then in retirement in Toronto, a city with a large cluster of Sri Lankan Tamil migrants, variously estimated at 130,000 to 200,000,⁷ and a heartland of *Thamileelamist* or *Ilavar*⁸ sentiment. From my familiarity with the working of diasporic groups, I surmise that one of the *principal constituencies* being addressed by *TN*, at least implicitly, is the *diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil population* in general and the familiar circle of Wilson’s Tamil friends in Toronto in particular. This speculation is based on my own observation of a familiar pattern among Sri Lankan academics in all quarters. Scholars write in part for the approval of their immediate circle of friends within the same persuasion. Thus, their bibliographies draw on this circle and, unless specific and direct confrontations organise the exercise, carefully avoid citations from those in the opposed camps.⁹ Wilson himself has noted elsewhere that Arunachalam Mahadeva was considered a ‘traitor’ by the Tamils of Jaffna Peninsula because of his political links with president D.S. Senanayake and associates in the early 1940s.¹⁰ It is reasonable to surmise that, mindful of his fruitless association with Jayewardene in the period 1978–83, Wilson was (is) trying to avoid similar condemnation.

Therefore, the book should also be read as a *legitimation exercise* that re-positions Wilson as someone who is not a traitor. The problem faced in the recent past by Tamil moderates—a problem exposed by Sumathy Mohan in such feisty fashion¹¹—is that they are liable to the charge of ‘letting the side down’. Re-affirming

⁷ G.H. Peiris, ‘Clandestine Transactions Of the LTTE and the Secessionist Campaign in Sri Lanka’, in *Ethnic Studies Report*, Vol.19 (2001), p.3; and R. Cheran, ‘The Sixth Genre: Memory, History and the Tamil Diaspora Imagination’ (Colombo: Marga Institute, A History Of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, Monograph Series, No.7, 2001), p.2.

⁸ Based on his knowledge of Tamil and close association with the movement for Tamil liberation, Peter Schalk has recently stressed that the most appropriate indigenous term for ‘Tamil’ is *Ilavan* or *Ilavar*, rather than the allegedly pejorative ‘Eelamist’. See Peter Schalk, ‘Ilavar and Lankans, Emerging Identities in a Fragmented Island’, in *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol.3 (2002), p.48. A more appropriate label for the goal of ‘Eelam’ would be *Thamileelam* (*Thamililam*). Indeed, it is this label that is most widely used by the LTTE and those favouring the Tamil struggle. This suggests that the term it is not seen as disparaging.

⁹ A careful study of the references cited by those publishing from the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Kandy and those at the Social Scientists’ Association in Colombo would yield an interesting picture.

¹⁰ Wilson *Break-up*, p.69.

¹¹ S. Sumathy, ‘Militants, Militarism and the Crisis of (Tamil) Nationalism’ (Colombo: Marga Institute, A History Of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, Monograph Series, No.22, 2002).

one's attachments to one's network of acquaintances becomes important in such circumstances. A major book is a personal statement because it is interpreted thus by one's friends. (And by one's enemies, too, though Wilson himself was such an amiable and delightful person that one cannot imagine many such to exist.)

While residing in Toronto during his twilight years, Wilson nevertheless kept in contact with a wide network of Sri Lankan friends, many of them Sinhalese.¹² This ambivalent orientation surfaces within his book. As a staunch Sri Lankan nationalist of yesteryear, but latterly disillusioned and favouring *Thamileelam*, Wilson faced two ways.

Parenthetically, it may be noted that one of the ethnographic disclosures within the book is Wilson's own evaluation of the twentieth-century politics of long-resident Sri Lankan Tamil migrants in the city of Colombo. He notes that the 'Ceylon Tamils in government service and the sections of the professional class...especially those living in Colombo, did not want to rock the boat' and alienate the Sinhalese intelligentsia. 'Such fears gave rise *as they still do* to a kind of double-speak: when these Tamils are with their Sinhalese friends they condemn the so-called Ceylon Tamil 'extremists', while among themselves they express fears of Sinhalese majoritarianism'.¹³ This is a significant piece of historical data from an insider.

Its irony, though, lies in the manner in which Wilson's own politics in the 1990s straddled two worlds. Rather than read this as a deliberately two-faced stance, I stress that it is a product of paradoxical circumstance. Indeed, the value of *TN* may lie in this very fact: namely, that Wilson's review also embodies the story of his own personal transformation from an individual with investments in the entity and identity 'Sri Lankan', to being an *Ilavar* or *Thamileelamist* moving towards support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).¹⁴ That, after all, has been the path taken by the TULF lately and which it made manifest in November 2001 just before the general elections.¹⁵

¹² For instance, Jayantha Dhanapala and C.R. de Silva, both resident in the USA during the 1990s.

¹³ A.J. Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism. Its Origins and Development in the 19th and 20th Centuries* [hereafter *TN*] (London: Hurst and Co., 2000), p.74 (emphasis added). K.M. de Silva makes a similar point, but as a sharp reprimand to the Sri Lanka Tamils. See K.M. de Silva, 'Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka', pp.386–7. Cf. Wilson's earlier comment: 'Jaffna Tamils [in Colombo] showed no desire to enter into a full and complete relationship with the neighbouring Sinhalese population. Thus, flourishing Jaffna Tamil settlements that grew up in certain parts of the city of Colombo became self-contained units'. A.J. Wilson, 'Sinhalese-Tamil Relations and the Problem Of National Integration', *Ceylon Studies Seminar*, 1968/69 Series, No.1.

¹⁴ See Wilson, *TN*, pp.11–12, 155–6.

¹⁵ Personal communication from D. Nesiiah, supplemented by email note from Lakshman Gunasekera, editor of the *Sunday Observer*.

II

In commencing this essay by focusing on Wilson's *personal subjectivity*, I mark not only the paradoxical tensions of his intellectual context, but also his biographical vicissitudes in a situation of escalating conflict. Wilson does not pay attention to self-reflexivity in the ways that have been developed in recent years within the social science disciplines. Without going to the extremes of egoistic navel-gazing adopted by some authors, it is important that a measure of introspectiveness should circumscribe one's own procedures—the more so when one is a player in the field.

That Wilson has not attended to this requirement is a sign of the positivist traditions in which he learned his trade. This learning began in the 1940s/1950s and developed in a British context where scholars moved relatively freely between the disciplines of political science and history. As such, Wilson's work is, for the most part, an empirical political narrative leavened with first-order analysis, a type of study that is also a feature of the work produced by K.M. de Silva,¹⁶ his bosom friend at Peradeniya University in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷

Wilson's positivist heritage is underlined in his early work by what some would regard as a bland style of writing. But this style was (is) also lucid. Such clarity of exposition remains in his latter-day works. Both his simplicity of expression and his empiricist narrative provide *TN*, no less than earlier works, with a dispassionate air. Thus, they convey credibility, even where, as with *TN*, the analysis is more obviously engaged and livelier. In this manner it is likely that non-specialists will be seduced by the seeming neutrality and definitive self-conviction that threads the presentation. It is this *global readership*, after all, that is the *other major constituency* that Wilson is addressing, an audience that he wishes to persuade (albeit in a different way to the other constituency, the Sri Lankan Tamils, who are already convinced about the legitimacy of the Tamil struggle).

The international market for Wilson's book is, of course, diverse. There may be some readers versed in deconstructionist and post-colonial theory who are sceptical of naturalised ethnic sentiments and who stress the dislocations arising from

¹⁶ Note the manner in which de Silva celebrates the role of a 'die-hard empiricist'. See K.M. de Silva, 'A Die-hard Empiricist Historian Responds', *Daily News* (Apr. 1991); and Michael Roberts, 'People Inbetween and Professor de Silva's Diehard History', *Daily News* (27 Mar. 1991).

¹⁷ Wilson, de Silva and H.A. de S. Gunasekera were a close circle at Peradeniya University when I was teaching there in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, de Silva and Wilson were critical influences in the election of Gunasekera to the position of Dean, Arts, c. 1969. Since Gunasekera was a leading member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Trotskyist) and de Silva's connections were with the right-wing United National Party, these ties cut across party lines. K.M. de Silva's *A History Of Sri Lanka* was published by Hurst and Company in 1981 and it is likely that de Silva brought Hurst and Wilson together. The emergence of sharp political disagreement between de Silva and Wilson is suggested by Wilson's acid comment in *Break-up*, p.30.

'globalisation', but they are a minority even among the intelligentsia. One segment within the global readership, both academic and non-specialist, is governed by the positivist epistemology associated with 'history' learned at school. To such mentalities a dispassionate style of writing is the stuff of truth. At the same time Wilson is casting his interpretations upon fertile ground. The pogrom of 1983, the story of the relative discrimination faced by Tamils in Sri Lanka from the late 1950s, the clever propaganda work of Tamil spokespersons in the global circuit and the activities of the Indian government at one stage had, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, consolidated a picture of the Sri Lankan Tamil peoples as victims.¹⁸

For this world readership the book is designed as a legitimisation exercise. It is argued that Tamil nationalism developed and hardened in the face of Sinhalese 'hegemonism' (p.116ff) and as a response to their victimisation. In this view, the oppressive and discriminatory policies of political parties dominated by the Sinhalese generated a 'defensive Tamil nationalism' that initially sought a federal system as a protective device and then demanded a separate state in their 'traditional homelands' after the oppressive ratchets were tightened. A body of people who wished to find their place within the island polity was driven to such a position by Sinhala 'exclusivism'. A separate state of Eelam is, now, in the 1990s, the only path to peace. This is the crux of the story that is unfolded in chronological detail in *TN*.

Its seeming validity arises not only from the style of writing. It is also a *part-truth* that gains endorsement from sources less immersed in Tamil sentiments. As far back as the mid-1970s I was pointing to the structural factors that discouraged the Sinhala leaders from making adequate compromises at opportune moments.¹⁹ Likewise, Sinhala scholars who have lived in Sri Lanka throughout the latter half of the twentieth century have criticised the 'Sinhala leaders [of the 1950s onwards]...for the overweening confidence with which they disregarded the concerns

¹⁸ Among the considerable body of evidence marking the discrimination and/or assaults on Tamils, see S.J. Tambiah, *Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling Of Democracy* (London: Tauris & Co., 1986); Thornton and Niththiyanathan, *Sri Lanka. Island Of Terror*; Kanapathipillai, 'July 1983: The Survivor's Experience'; and Rajan Hoole, *Sri Lanka: The Arrogance Of Power. Myths, Decadence and Murder* (Colombo: Wasala Publications for the UTHR, 2001), pp.63–169. The various Eelamist forces also indulged in atrocities, sometimes directed against each other in the course of a struggle for power. *Ibid.*, pp.324–5, 338–43, 425–8. The LTTE's carefully engineered assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in India may have been the catalyst that opened the eyes of international governments and led to a re-evaluation of the Tamil Eelamist cause.

¹⁹ Michael Roberts, 'Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives: Barriers to Accommodation', in *Modern Asia Studies*, Vol.12 (1978), pp.353–76. Written in 1976, this article anticipated the degeneration of the struggles into a warring situation of the type associated with Cyprus, Lebanon and Northern Ireland. This forecast was partially correct and partially erroneous. What has happened in Sri Lanka has been a greater disaster in terms of death, killing and destruction.

of the Tamils on the crucial problems...related to issues concerning equality of citizenship'.²⁰

Some qualifications should, however, be introduced into this line of argument. First, any detailed review of the period 1931 to the 1990s dependent on secondary sources should compare Wilson's interpretation with that articulated by K.M. de Silva in his three major works.²¹ Second, one must note omissions in Wilson's story arising from two shortcomings: one deriving from the enormous gaps that exist in the literature on Tamil politics and ideological expressions during the twentieth century, particularly with reference to representations made in the Tamil vernacular, whether in print, poetry or dramatic theatre;²² the second from Wilson's relative incompetence in Tamil and his concentration on elite politics for the most part (so that Chandrakanthan is co-opted to write a chapter on 'Eelam Tamil nationalism'). Speculatively, I believe that new researches in the future by scholars prepared to look beyond the victimisation thesis will unearth strands of intransigence and/or extremism in Sri Lankan Tamil circles that go back to the 1950s.²³ The issue, then, would be to work out the degree to which these positions hindered compromises. One should recall, here, that as early as the mid-1960s Arasaratnam observed that the 'extremes of Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil *separatism* fed each other'.²⁴

²⁰ Godfrey Gunatilleke, 'Negotiations for the Resolution Of the Ethnic Conflict' (Colombo: Marga Institute, A History Of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, Monograph Series, No.1, 2001), p.6. There is a sense in which K.M. de Silva also supports a similar thesis, though his summary is qualified by a conceptualisation of 'separatism' in broad terms to encompass the Federal Party's goals in 1949. See K.M. de Silva, 'Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka', pp.388, 391–3. Both Gunatilleke and I have been roundly abused by H.L.D. Mahindapala, a former editor of a newspaper who is now residing in Melbourne and is widely identified with Sinhala hardliners. See H.L.D. Mahindapala, 'Academics expose Michael Roberts', 24 May 2002 [<http://www.LankaWeb>]; H.L.D. Mahindapala, 'Tamil Racism boosted by Bogus Theories', 25 May 2002 [<http://www.LankaWeb>]; and <http://www.island.lk>, 17 Nov. 2001 *et seq.* Again, in July this year (2002), the editor of the *Daily News* refused to consider some of my articles on Sri Lankan cricket—repeat 'cricket'—on the grounds that I was 'that LTTE political scientist' (email note from an intermediary, 2 Aug. 2002).

²¹ K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981); K.M. de Silva, *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi-Ethnic Societies. Sri Lanka 1880–1985* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986); and K.M. de Silva, *Reaping the Whirlwind. Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Politics in Sri Lanka* (Penguin Books, 1998)

²² Notwithstanding the works of Thaninayagam, Arasaratnam, Sivathamby, Russel, Manogaran, Cheran, Narayan Swamy and Hellmann-Rajanayagam among others.

²³ For signs of early extremism, see D.B.S. Jeyaraj, 'The Composition, Ideology and International Dimension Of the Tamil Secessionist Movement Of Sri Lanka: An Overview', in R. Premdas (ed.), *The Enigma Of Ethnicity* (St. Augustine, Trinidad: School of Continuing Studies, University of West Indies, 1993) pp.289–90; and note the activities of the *Pulip Padai* from 1961 onwards, in M.R. Narayan Swamy, *Tigers of Lanka. From Boys to Guerrillas* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994), p.24. Nor should one forget that G.G. Ponnambalam's attempts to protect Sri Lankan Tamil interests in the 1930s and early 1940s rendered his politics an obstacle to the reform of the existing Donoughmore Constitution in the direction of independence. In effect, he sought to work with the British. See M. Roberts (ed.), *Documents Of the Ceylon National Congress and Nationalist Politics in Ceylon, 1929–1940*, Vol. III (Colombo: Dept. of National Archives, 1977), item 114, pp.2483–98. While Wilson is critical of Ponnambalam, he fails to bring this out in an incisive manner in either *TN* or *Break-up*—in part because he is totally unaware of *Documents Of the Ceylon National Congress*. For other evidence of extreme forms of Tamil chauvinist sentiment as early as the 1930s, sitting alongside extreme forms of Sinhala chauvinism, see Jane Russel, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution, 1931–1947* (Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1982).

²⁴ S. Arasaratnam, 'Nationalism, Communalism and National Unity in Ceylon', in P. Mason (ed.) *India and Ceylon: Unity and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.274 (emphasis added).

There are two other problems with Wilson's body of argument. For one, as we shall see below, it treats the concept of a 'traditional homelands' as an unquestioned fact and indulges in some historical dissimulation in treating an arbitrary line drawn by the British in the mid-nineteenth century as a historical given going back to antiquity. For another, its leaning towards 'independence' for the Tamils in the face of an 'all-consuming' Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and its espousal of partition as a *pathway to peace* in the island (pp.11–12, 155–6, emphasis added) is an extremely naïve position. Though I have supported the idea of 'a consociation of nationalities' and a 'new form of confederated alliance',²⁵ that is not the same thing as a partition of the island. I assert here that the emergence of *Thamileelam* as a recognised juridical unit with sovereignty is likely to generate war at a worse level, an escalation that will be all the more intense because of the restricted space in which it occurs.²⁶ To anticipate 'the likelihood' that the 'two nationalisms' will settle upon 'some form of peaceful coexistence' once a partition is effected, as Wilson does (p.11), is wishful thinking of a dangerous kind.

III

Wilson's *TN* is not only a detailed story of the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka. As a political scientist he secures his presentation within a conceptual scheme. His conceptual framework involves a *three-fold scheme* that is designed to *periodise* the evolution of Sri Lankan Tamil thinking. From the advent of the British in 1796, in this view, the Tamils were a 'community' with 'group consciousness' or '*national awareness*'. However 'from the mid-1920s onwards Tamil national awareness became transformed into a new phenomenon, Tamil national consciousness' (pp.1, 3). (The only clarification of the distinction between the two categories is that national awareness is 'passive' (p.3)—a point that implicitly renders the concept national consciousness more active and demanding.) This *national consciousness* was 'brought to fever pitch under the leadership of Chelvanayakam and the Federal Party' (p.4) from 1949–51 onwards. Later (in the 1970s and 1980s) the militants developed an ideology of Tamil nationalism, 'defensive and reactive' (p.5).

Further elaboration of this framework unfolds in piecemeal fashion within *TN*. The activities of the Federal Party (FP) in the 1950s are described as 'a quasi-nationalism' that is not 'fully-fledged' (pp.101, 85). That is, Wilson argues, 'a true nationalism can only be said to begin with a call for a territorially demarcated *contiguous* unit' (p.85, emphasis added). Because the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces was not demanded by the FP during the 1950s and 1960s,²⁷ its

²⁵ Michael Roberts, 'History as Dynamite', *Island Special Millennium Issue* (1 Jan. 2000), p.34.

²⁶ Note my arguments on these lines in mid-2001. Michael Roberts, 'Thoughts on Peace in Sri Lanka', 31 July 2001, draft memo for Marga discussions.

²⁷ This picture is contradicted by K.M. de Silva in *Reaping the Whirlwind*, pp.150, 154; as well as a quotation from a policy statement by the Federal Party in 1951 quoted in Robert N. Kearney, *The Politics Of Ceylon (Sri Lanka)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p.116.

ideology is, accordingly, deemed less ‘true’—thus less nationalist. In effect, one is confronted with a four-fold scheme (unless one fuses the politics of the period 1920–49 with that of the FP under the rubric of a ‘national consciousness’ that is ‘quasi-nationalist’). In sum, there are inconsistencies in Wilson’s framework.

Wilson’s general theory, therefore, seems to arise from the requirements of his particular case rather than the other way around. It attaches primacy to the geographical shape of the future state espoused by a movement. This shape must be *singular and focused on a contiguous territory*. In effect, this framework subordinates the element of ideology and the sentiment ‘us’ as espoused in significant contexts by articulate Sri Lankan Tamils. For this reason it is less than useful.

It is deficient, too, in its ethnographic foundations. Wilson does not present one iota of evidence that the Tamil activists of the interwar years conceived of themselves in sustained fashion as a ‘nation’. The self-description utilised during this period in English-speak was ‘Tamil community’.²⁸ On the other hand the Jaffna Youth Congress, active from 1924 to the 1940s, was motivated by a commitment to Ceylonese nationalism.²⁹ Likewise Cheran’s brief survey indicates that even in the Tamil medium, the work of such literary figures as Thuraiappah Pillai (1872–1929) and Comasuntara Pulavar ‘articulated the theme of secular Ceylonese nationalism’ while the *marumalarchi* or ‘renaissance’ movement of the 1940s also worked within these parameters.³⁰

In my reading of Sri Lankan Tamil ideology within the limits of the published material in English available today, the critical transformation came in 1949–51, when the Federal Party emerged as a splinter association and defined the Sri Lanka Tamils as a ‘nationality’ that was entitled to ‘self-determination’.³¹ The pathway to this development seems to have been provided by the Ceylon Communist Party

²⁸ Thus, see the news report on the public meeting of the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress on 10 April 1937 and the memorandum (to the British government) submitted by the president of the All-Ceylon Tamil Conference in July 1937. See Roberts (ed.), *Documents Of the Ceylon National Congress*, Vol. III, items 91 and 93, pp.2100ff, 2140ff. The concept ‘community’ was used widely to refer in the third person to all groups, e.g. the Malays, Burghers, Mohammedans, etc., and was also adopted as a self-description.

²⁹ On the Jaffna Youth Congress, see Devanesan Nesiah, ‘The Claim Of Self-Determination: A Sri Lankan Tamil Perspective’, in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol.10 (2001) pp.59–60; Devanesan Nesiah, ‘Tamil Nationalism’ (Colombo: Marga Insitute, A History Of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, Monograph Series, No. 6, 2001), pp.9–13; and Russel, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution*, pp.26–51.

³⁰ R. Cheran, ‘Cultural Politics Of Tamil Nationalism’, in *South Asia Bulletin*, no.12 (1992), pp.44–6.

³¹ Michael Roberts, ‘Meanderings in the Pathways Of Collective Identity and Nationalism’, in M. Roberts (ed.), *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Marga Publications, 1979), pp.38–9; and Michael Roberts, ‘Sinhala-ness and Sinhala Nationalism’ (Colombo: Marga Insitute, A History of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, Monograph Series, No. 4, 2001), p.22. Also see Cheran, ‘Cultural Politics Of Tamil Nationalism’, p.46.

(CCP). As a body affiliated to the Ceylon National Congress, the CCP argued in October 1944 that ‘the *nationalities* (Sinhalese and Tamil) have the right of free self-determination, including the right, if they so desire, to form their own separate independent state[s]’. In this presentation the terms ‘nation’ and ‘nationality’ were used interchangeably as, indeed, they were in the West. The ‘nation’ was defined as ‘a historical, as opposed to an ethnographical, concept. It is a historically-evolved, stable community of people, living in a contiguous territory as *their traditional homeland*, speaking a common language, having a common psychological make-up, manifested in a community of culture’.³² When the FP presented its foundational statement at its first convention in 1951, it used language that was strikingly similar:

The Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon constitute a nation distinct from that of the Singhalese [*sic*] by every fundamental test of nationhood, firstly that of a separate historical past in the island at least as ancient and as glorious as that of the Singalese [*sic*], secondly, by the fact of their being a linguistic entity entirely different from that of the Sinhalese...and finally, by reason of their territorial habitation of definite areas which constitute over one-third of this Island.³³

This conceptualisation, note, was seconded by rhetoric that identified the need to ‘work for the attainment of *freedom* for the Tamil speaking people of Ceylon’.³⁴

IV

The principal interest in *TN*, however, is in detailing the development of Tamil politics in interaction with other players, namely, the British, Sinhalese and Muslims, in their specific configurations at different points of time. Its strength is in these details and no scholar can study the politics of the late twentieth century without addressing its material.

The detail is weighted towards elite politics. This is due in part to the limited data available to Wilson on the ideas expressed in the Tamil vernacular. This constraint is compounded by Wilson’s conventionality of approach, a transactionalist one that

³² See the ‘CCP’s Resolutions and Memoranda and the CNC, Oct–November 1944’, being item 124 in Roberts (ed.), *Documents Of the Ceylon National Congress*, Vol.III, pp.2574–91 (emphasis added). The words here are virtually verbatim from Josef Stalin’s famous pamphlet *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., repr., 1940).

³³ Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi, ‘The Case for a Federal Constitution for Ceylon’ (Colombo: 1951), as quoted by Robert N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics Of Ceylon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967), p.94.

³⁴ With emphasis added, this quotation is from Chelvanayakam’s ‘Presidential Address’ in 1951 as quoted by Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics Of Ceylon*, p.93.

focuses on the cut and thrust of competing interest groups. Though the third chapter dwells on the relationship between Tamil nationalism and language, culture and poetry, it is brief and not integrated into the central body of work, namely chapters 4 to 8. Indeed, in referring to Kailasapathy's remark that folk art in the late British period has been inadequately investigated,³⁵ Wilson makes the surprising observation that the popular arts 'occupied its own separate sphere, outside politics' (p.35), an argument he later extends to the Sinhalese by separating their 'political nationalism' from 'cultural and linguistic revivalism' (p.182).³⁶ This is a blinkered perspective that permits no expansion of the concept 'politics' in ways that would incorporate the influence of ideological currents in varied sites in the manner worked out for southern India by such scholars as Ramaswamy³⁷ and Pandian;³⁸ and for the Sri Lankan Tamils, albeit sketchily, by Cheran.³⁹

The most significant failing in this detailed narrative, however, is one that bears on its principal thesis, the power of Sinhala majoritarianism and the subordination of the Tamils. As Wilson tells the story, this theme runs through *from the 1920s to the 1990s*, growing episodically in linear progression.⁴⁰ This claim is simply not true for the period before 1947, and is way off the mark for the 1920s.⁴¹ That such an argument can be developed (1) marks the degree to which Wilson has read the present into the past; and (2) suggests the influence of personal subjectivity and bitterness.

The distortions become most apparent in his interpretation of the politics of the

³⁵ K. Kailasapathy, *The Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness Of the Tamil Community in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: 1982).

³⁶ A Sinhala scholar of the same vintage as Wilson, E.R. Sarachchandra, makes a similar mistake in his early work when he remarks that 'the national and religious revival [in the Sinhala medium at the grassroots level in the British period] was almost completely divorced from the political movement [for constitutional reform] that started about the same time.' See E.R. Sarachchandra, *The Folk Drama Of Ceylon* (Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 2nd ed., 1966), p.213. I have marshalled evidence against this type of approach in numerous publications. See Michael Roberts, 'The Political Antecedents Of the Revivalist Elite within the MEP Coalition Of 1956', in C.R. de Silva and Sirima Kiribamune (eds), *K.W. Goonewardena Felicitation Volume* (Peradeniya University, 1989), pp.185–220; Michael Roberts, *Exploring Confrontation*, ch.12, 3 and 6; and Michael Roberts, *People Inbetween. Vol.1. The Burghers and the Middle Class in the Transformations within Sri Lanka, 1790s–1960s* (Ratmalana: Sarvodaya Book Publishing, 1989), ch.1.

³⁷ Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'The Nation, the Region and the Adventures Of a Tamil "Hero"', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., Vol.28, (1994), pp.295–322; and Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions Of the Tongue. Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

³⁸ M.S.S. Pandian, *The Image Trap* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).

³⁹ Cheran, 'Cultural Politics Of Tamil Nationalism', pp.42–56.

⁴⁰ This argument is developed in greater detail, quite tendentiously and through selective choice of data as much as an instrumentalist perspective, in Wilson's *Break-up*. See, for example, pp.7–8, 15, 17, 22, 29–32, 60.

⁴¹ My verdict is based on the work put into the book-length introduction to Roberts (ed.) *Documents Of the Ceylon National Congress* as well as memories derived from extensive interviews in the late 1960s with British and Ceylonese civil servants of that era, besides a few political activists (eg. A.W.H. Abeyesundera, R.S.S. Gunewardene, A.P. Jayasuriya, D.H.S. Nanayakkara, and Dr S.A. Wickremasinghe).

early 1920s, from Ponnambalam Arunachalam's breakaway from the Ceylon National Congress to the political manoeuvres of the British governor, William Manning. Wilson's authority for these issues is K.M. de Silva. However Wilson puts a different spin on de Silva's data. Manning becomes a person with foresight who 'understood the ramifications of conceding the demand for unadulterated territorial representation' (p.67). He is credited with an attempt to prevent one community (clearly the Sinhalese, who then constituted about 67 percent of the population) from securing domination (pp.57–8, 67–8). In this reading the Sinhala leaders of the day were trying 'to accumulate a sizeable territorial majority for themselves' (p.59).

In reaching these conclusions Wilson simply discounts other evidence that has come to light on the dominant strands of thought in the 1910s and 1920s in Western-educated political circles. This evidence includes that marshalled by Wilson himself (1959) as well as by others.⁴² Because of the influence of liberalism, as well the currents of thinking associated with the Indian National Congress, the 'Ceylonese' leaders of that era were opposed to 'communalism'. Both in British India and in Sri Lanka 'communalism' was a dirty word in the political lexicon of the time.⁴³ In consequence there was a dogmatic refusal to countenance 'communal representation'. As expressed in Sri Lanka this perspective can be criticised for its lack of pragmatism and its stratospheric ideals.⁴⁴ Yet to impose any other interpretation implies subterfuge and conspiratorial designs in a manner that is a gross misrepresentation of the integrity and thinking of such individuals as E.W. Perera, E.J. Samerawickrame,⁴⁵ F.R. Senanayake, Francis de

⁴² A.J. Wilson, 'The Crewe-McCallum Reforms, 1912–1921', in *Ceylon Journal Of Historical and Social Studies*, Vol.2 (1959), pp.84–120; A.J. Wilson, 'The Development Of the Constitution', in K.M. de Silva (ed.), *History of Ceylon. Vol. 3* (University of Ceylon Press Board, 1973), pp.359–80; Roberts (ed.), *Documents of the Ceylon National Congress*; Roberts, 'Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives', pp.353–76; Michael Roberts, 'Stimulants and Ingredients in the Awakening Of Latter-Day Nationalisms', in M. Roberts (ed.), *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Marga Publications, 1979), pp.214–42; Russel, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution*, p.332; K.M. de Silva, 'The Reform and Nationalist Movements in the Early Twentieth Century', in K.M. de Silva (ed.), *History of Ceylon. Vol.3* (University of Ceylon Press Board, 1973) pp.381–407; and K.M. de Silva, *A History Of Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), ch.27–32. Wilson's new position seems to have been reached in the mid-1980s and is quite marked his 1988 book *Break-Up*.

⁴³ Roberts, 'Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives', pp.355-6; Russel, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution*, pp.333–4; and Arasaratnam, 'Nationalism, Communalism and National Unity in Ceylon', pp.261-2. Cf. Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), ch.1.

⁴⁴ As, indeed, I have argued, by contrasting the more flexible position adopted by C.E. Corea and young S. W.R.D. Bandaranaike in the 1920s with that of the other leaders. See Roberts, 'Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives', p.359.

⁴⁵ Samerawickrame was known among his peers as the 'keeper of the nation's conscience'. See H.A.J. Hulugalle, *The Life and Times Of D.R. Wijewardene* (Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, 1960), p.vii of index and pp.74–5.

Zoysa and James Peiris, who were among those who insisted on the principle of territorial representation.

Those who knew Wilson in the 1960s and 1970s would state categorically that he would never have presented such an interpretation then.⁴⁶ Indeed, in evaluating the politics in the period 1948–56, he had this to say: ‘there was a hardcore of *Tamil communal elements* which ranged itself against the UNP in defence of the rights of the groups it claimed to represent’.⁴⁷ So his reading in *TN* of the initial split between Sinhala and Tamil leaders during the 1920s is one that has developed since the early 1980s.

When a scholar lives through an era of sharp conflict and massive transformation, consistency of interpretation cannot be demanded. But when a shift of position invests an imperial viceroy with vision, the basis of this shift must be called into question. Manning’s *realpolitik* was to delay constitutional devolution.⁴⁸ That Wilson should occlude this goal and fall into line with imperialism is a measure of the embittered disenchantment that informs both *TN* and *Break-Up*.⁴⁹ (Parenthetically I note here that his support for British imperialist stonewalling in the 1920s is in step with the ease with which he seems to contemplate the possibility of Rajiv Gandhi incorporating ‘north-east Sri Lanka into India’ in order to secure ‘lasting peace’ during the late 1980s: p.149). This is how partisan subjectivity inspires conventional politics: the distant superpower is better than one’s immediate ‘domestic’ opponent. Imperial incursions have thrived for centuries on the activities of indigenous factions who pursue this principle.

V

Perhaps because of his relative unfamiliarity with the militant youth and the events in the Jaffna Peninsula in the 1980s and 1990s, Wilson has coopted A.J.V.

⁴⁶ See Wilson’s references to Manning in his rather dry study, ‘The Development Of the Constitution’, pp.359–80; as well as Wilson, ‘Sinhalese-Tamil Relations and the Problem Of National Integration’.

⁴⁷ A.J. Wilson ‘Politics and Political Development since 1948’, in K.M. de Silva (ed.), *Sri Lanka. A Survey* (London: Hurst & Co. 1977), p.285 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ See K.M de Silva, *A History Of Sri Lanka*, pp.390–5 for a summary of Manning’s activities. Detailed analysis is in K.M. de Silva, ‘The Ceylon National Congress in Disarray, 1920–1: Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam leaves the Congress’, in *Ceylon Journal Of Historical and Social Studies*, n.s., Vol.II (1972), pp.97–117; and K.M. de Silva, ‘The Ceylon National Congress in Disarray II: The Triumph Of Sir William Manning, 1921–1924’, in *Ceylon Journal Of Historical and Social Studies*, n.s., Vol.III (1973), pp.16–39.

⁴⁹ As problematically, he invests the Sri Lanka Tamils of the 1920s and 1930s with the same faith in the British: ‘They hoped’, he says, ‘that Britain would remain in the island until the majority and minorities had time to reconcile their differences’. See *TN*, p.80. This seems to be a gross misreading of the anti-colonial sentiments of the Jaffna Youth Congress as well as all those Tamils who joined the Leftists. For contrary evidence, see Nesiah, ‘The Claim Of Self-Determination’, pp.59–60; and Cheran, ‘Cultural Politics Of Tamil Nationalism’ pp.46–8. Nor must one forget that some Tamils, such as M.A. Arulanandan, Dr S. Muttiah, Dr E.V. Ratnam and C.S. Rajaratnam, remained within the Ceylon National Congress in the 1920s.

Chandrakanthan, a Catholic clergyman and former lecturer at the University of Jaffna, to provide an ‘inside view’ of ‘Eelam Tamil nationalism’ in chapter 9. Chandrakanthan lived in the Jaffna Peninsula during that period and experienced one of its worst moments in late 1995 when the army of the Sri Lankan state broke out of its beachhead at Palaly and conquered the western half of the Peninsula, inclusive of Jaffna town. Writing from the safety of Montreal in 1998, Chandrakanthan provides a passionate account. He casts himself and the Tamils in general as victims. Like Wilson, he presents the Tamil movement as a struggle for liberation and a ‘defensive...nationalism’ (p.161).

This is an invaluable essay, although its value lies in its fervour rather than its analytical rigour. Read it, and you will hear an authentic voice of the (Sri Lankan) Tamils speaking for the (Sri Lankan) Tamils.⁵⁰ Chandrakanthan’s picture of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, for instance, is a veritable paean of praise in the *kāvya* tradition of the Indic world—a tradition that both Tamils and Sinhalese share.⁵¹

In other words, this chapter is a significant primary source rather than a reliable secondary study. We learn that (some) Tamils are nurtured and trained to regard themselves as *uyirayutham*, that is, to make their life into a weapon. This is the making of the suicide bomber, in other words—a person to whom suicide is a *that-kodai* or ‘self-gift’ (p.164).⁵² We are also told, usefully, that the living rooms of Tamils of the diaspora are replete with LTTE icons (p.170).

⁵⁰ My adjectival insertion ‘Sri Lankan’ thereby distinguishes the so-called ‘Indian Tamils’ or Malaiyaha Tamils from the Sri Lankan Tamils. Chandrakanthan, typically, makes no such differentiation. In a hegemonic move he subsumes the sentiments of the latter within his own. Indeed, he proclaims confidently that Prabhakaran’s fame and mythical status has ‘partly helped the gradual intra-ethnic unification of the Tamil community’. See *TN*, p.161.

⁵¹ For Sinhalese forms of *kāvya*, see the *sandēsa* (message) poems. For an excellent translation of one, the *Pārakumba sirita*, see K.D.P. Wickremasinghe (ed.), *Pārakumba Sirita* (Colombo: M.D. Gunasena and Co., 1970). For a succinct note on *kāvya* in India in the past, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.232.

⁵² Chandrakanthan has provided a transliteration that matches the aural sound. The correct rendering should be *tarkotai*, with appropriate diacritica. The term *tarkotai* is of new coinage, linking the word *tan* meaning ‘self’ with *kotai* meaning ‘gift’. This innovation may be a play on the word for suicide, namely *tarkolai*. In any event, it raises the act of using one’s body as a weapon or tool of protest to a higher sacrificial level than the ‘normal’ act of taking one’s life. For elaborations on the sacrificial world of Tamilian heritage, see A.K. Ramanujan, *Poems Of Love and War* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985); Denis Hudson, ‘Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nayanars: A Study in the Periya Purānam Of Cekkilar’, in A. Hilfbeitel (ed.), *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees* (Delhi: Manohar, 1990), pp.373–405; David D. Shulman, *The Hungry God. Hindu Tales Of Filicide and Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp.16–47; and from a non-specialist, Michael Roberts, ‘Filial Devotion and the Tiger Cult Of Suicide’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.30 (1996), pp.245–72. Note the form of sacrifice, or *yajna*, involving ‘the literal enactment of violent loss’, one that requires the giving of ‘some part or parts of the self’ in ways that ‘[touch] the deepest levels of experience’. See Shulman, *The Hungry God*, p.16.

Not least, we learn that Prabhakaran is regarded as a *thesai thalaivar* ('national leader' or 'supremo'). *Thalaivan* (and thus *thalaivar*) can also be read as 'hero'.⁵³ The significance of Chandrakanthan's account is the manner in which it reveals how he himself, like numerous Sri Lankan Tamils, regards Prabhakaran as a God with a capital G. In saying that Prabhakaran is like a king of the same 'mythic proportions [of the] ancient Tamil kings and heroes' (pp.169, 161), he celebrates his own devotion to man and cause.

Yet Chandrakanthan also attempts to sustain his imagery with strategic devices directed at the Western audience that is a major constituency for his propaganda. Prabhakaran's legendary status, it is said, is seen by Christian Tamils as comparable to that of a 'Tamil Moses' (p.159). Likewise, the self-sacrificial suicide personnel are compared to *sannyāsis* or ascetics (p.164).

These stratagems are too obvious to work. And they are undermined by Chandrakanthan's fervent excess.⁵⁴ How many readers will swallow his linkage of 'heroic death' with 'the ancient Tamil religion of Saivism' (p.164) in a manner that renders Saivism into a Tamil possession rather than a 'Great Tradition' within India writ large?⁵⁵ The problem with zealous propaganda is its very zealotry.

As problematic for me, however, is the intellectual dishonesty attached to his account of that undoubtedly bitter moment, the enforced departure of virtually the whole population of Jaffna town and its environs in the face of the army advance. Chandrakanthan presents only one half of the truth when he says that this event 'set in motion an exodus into the south of the Jaffna Peninsula' (p.162). Virtually every one in Sri Lanka is aware of the grapevine knowledge that the LTTE decided—intelligently, as with most of their military operations—to make a strategic withdrawal after their initial resistance. As one former Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) fighter put it, 'the sharks took the sea with them'. Not to mention this fact is a dereliction (albeit a deliberate one).

In so far as Chandrakanthan's essay appears within the covers of Wilson's book, it gathers up the latter's considerable academic credentials. The two make up a

⁵³ Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp.26, 30. In southern India the actor-turned politician, MGR, was called *puratchi talaivar* as well as *ithaya deivam*, namely 'revolutionary leader' and 'lord of our hearts'. See *Frontline* (9–22 Jan. 1988); and Pandian, *The Image Trap*, p.117. The terms *thesai* and *thalaivar* have been spelt in the text in the style adopted by Chandrakanthan, which is the popular Sri Lankan manner. The correct transliteration would be *tesai*, *talaivar*, etc.

⁵⁴ Thus the burning of the Jaffna Library in 1981 (by reservist policemen avenging the killing of a Tamil colleague) is presented as 'the beginning of a systematic cultural genocide' (p.160).

⁵⁵ Cf. K. Sivathamby, 'The Ideology Of Saiva-Tamil Integrality. Its Socio-Historical Significance in the Study Of Yālpānam Tamil Society', in *Lanka*, Vol.5 (1990), pp.176–85.

partnership, the more so because their principal thesis overlaps. Thus, any sins of omission or commission on Chandrakanthan's part accrue to Wilson himself.

VI

The worst of these sins is the manner in which both of them justify the picture of 'traditional homelands' occupied by the Sri Lanka Tamils⁵⁶ and equate this area with the boundaries of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. This picture is selectively blind and designed to pull the wool over the eye of readers, local as well as foreign, who are blissfully ignorant about the island's history.⁵⁷ An ingredient in this picture is a particular conspiratorial reading of state-sponsored 'colonisation policy', as it is known locally, from its inception in the 1930s to the 1980s.

As embodied in the term 'traditional', the argument is based on historical justifications. Indeed, *TN* begins with the historian Pathmanathan's statement that the 'Tamils have lived in Sri Lanka from pre-Christian times' (p.14). This is probably correct, but there are three critical issues that bear on the implications we can attach to this fact over the course of subsequent centuries (within the limits of the source material that is available). Firstly, did these people remain Tamil-speakers or, as the extant data suggests, become mostly speakers of what is known as Sinhalese Prakrit or Proto-Sinhala?⁵⁸ Secondly, what was the relative numerical provenance of Tamil-speakers during the first millennium CE? And thirdly, what was the nature of their link with the evolving state systems of the Rajarata civilisation (say, third century BCE to twelfth century CE) that were centred initially at Anuradhapura and then around Polonnaruva?

Wilson refers elsewhere to C.R. de Silva's general history (1987) to note that there was 'a sizeable Tamil community' in the seventh century CE. But this single piece of evidence is problematic because we do not know what 'sizeable' amounts to and because de Silva is not a specialist. It would appear that de Silva draws on

⁵⁶ By its very nature this picture excludes the 'Indian Tamils' who came in the British period to work in the city of Colombo, the railways and public works departments and, above all, on the plantations. These people comprised as much as 12.9 percent of the total population in 1911 and 17.1 percent of the population of Colombo (as opposed to 12.9 and 7.1 percent respectively for those called 'Ceylon Tamils' in that census). When a significant segment of these people reside in the south-western lowlands and outside the plantations, the description that prevails today, that of 'Plantation Tamils' or 'Malaiyaha Tamils' is a misnomer. However, some lineages in the towns may have become Sinhala speakers over time.

⁵⁷ When a highly educated Sinhalese scholar like Jehan Perera, one who is a genuine grassroots worker for multi-cultural accommodation, is unaware (personal comment in late Jan. 2000) that the eastern coast of Sri Lanka was an integral part of the Kingdom of Kandy from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the gaps in information—and the success of Tamil propaganda—are starkly manifest.

⁵⁸ H.C. Ray (ed.), *History Of Ceylon, Vol.I, Part I* (Colombo: Ceylon University Press, 1959), p.35; and S. Paranavitana, *Sigiri Graffiti being Sinhalese Verses Of the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

Pathmanathan's survey, but the latter's suggestions themselves are not congruent with the evidence in the Tamil historian Indrapala's more substantive researches or the fragmentary data in the *History of Ceylon* (see fn. 59 and 62 below).

Since Pathmanathan serves as a critical authority in these citations, readers must be made aware of the fact that his book focuses for the most part on the Kingdom of Yalppanam (or Jaffna), a state that dates from the mid-late thirteenth century CE. As such, his work only addresses the first millennium CE briefly.⁵⁹ It is, therefore, quite amazing that after his initial reference to Pathmanathan, Wilson proceeds to make the following claim:

From their heartland in the Jaffna Peninsula, where there was a dense concentration of population, the Sri Lanka Tamils fanned out *from the earliest times* to other parts of the island, penetrating the Northern Province and, from there, the Eastern Province....⁶⁰

Both 'facts' in this statement are monumental errors,⁶¹ which is perhaps why no evidence is offered in support of them (though there is a deceptive whiff of Pathmanathan's authority conveyed by the previous paragraph).⁶² While this subject needs re-visiting, let me note here that Indrapala's early work concludes that (a) the toponymic evidence involving over a thousand place names of distinctly Sinhalese origin 'in Tamil garb' indicates that most of the settlers in the Jaffna Peninsula during the Anurādhapura period were Sinhalese; and that (b) it seems unlikely that there were large numbers of resident Tamil settlers in the Jaffna Peninsula or elsewhere in the island other than the major ports and the capital city

⁵⁹ S. Pathmanathan, *The Kingdom Of Jaffna* (Colombo: A.M. Rajendran, 1978) pp.1–32. This sketch indicates that the Tamil immigrants were mainly merchants and soldiers, including armies in the service of invaders or local kings who hired mercenaries. It notes that the 'Tamils living in the island were concentrated in towns like Māntai and Anurādhapura, while the rest were scattered in the market towns and military outposts' (p.28). By its very nature the fragmentary data cannot indicate whether the Tamil speakers remained Tamil speakers over the centuries that followed.

⁶⁰ *TN*, p.14 (emphasis added). This type of claim is not new. Russel's researches indicate that the claims of original settlement were being presented by Sri Lankan Tamil propagandists in the 1930s, if not earlier. Russel, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution*, pp.147–50. One writer argued against the teaching of 'Ceylonese history' in schools because that would be a means of 'belittling us our past and humiliating us vis-a-vis the Sinhalese'. Speaking at Nawalapitiya in 1939, G.G. Ponnambalam even contended that the 'greatest Sinhalese Kings were Tamils' and suggested that the Sinhalese were 'a nation of hybrids without a history'. *Ibid.*, p.148.

⁶¹ Subsequently, in the last chapter of *TN*, Wilson presents two other statements that are open to question: (i) when he says that the Tamil armies of the north were 'poised to capture the whole island' in the fourteenth century (p.176); and (ii) when he suggests that the Tamil-speakers of the first millennium CE considered themselves to be one of the 'founding races' of the island (p.177). The concept of founding races, presented in single quotation marks by Wilson, appears to be his invention. It is a phrase I cannot recall seeing in the early twentieth century representations. In any event, it functions in *TN* as a historical charter for the Tamil claims. Cf. the acid comments on the manipulation of history by Tamil politicians as well as some scholars in K.M. de Silva, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, pp.152–3; and K.M. de Silva, 'Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka', pp.383–4.

⁶² I stress that Pathmanathan, in his *Kingdom Of Jaffna*, does not indulge in such outrageous statements. In fact, note the paraphrase of his carefully circumscribed statements in fn.59 above.

before the tenth century.⁶³ Other data on this period, as well as the information on the Sigiriya graffiti of the eighth to tenth centuries, substantiate this finding within the limits attached to the implications of place names, personal names, palaeography and orthography.⁶⁴

Subsequently, Chandrakanthan sustains the historical picture painted by Wilson by noting that when the Vaddukoddai Resolution of May 1976 in favour of separation was accepted by the Tamil political parties, the 'historical existence of the kingdom of Jaffna was seen as the legitimate basis for the demand for a sovereign Tamil state, i.e. the resuscitation of the former kingdom' (p.165). Thus, *TN consistently glosses over the fact that the Kingdom of Yalppanam* (mid thirteenth century to circa 1619) *only encompassed the Jaffna Peninsula and the northernmost section of the Vanni.*⁶⁵ Nowhere are readers told that the eastern littoral was *not* part of the Kingdom of Yalppanam (Jaffna). In the sixteenth century the formal administrative control of the Kingdom of Kotte—and, subsequently, from the 1590s, that of its successor-state, the Kingdom of Kandy (more properly *Sinhalē*)—included the ports of Trincomalee/Kottiyar and Batticaloa.⁶⁶

In bringing this historical information into purview, I do not imply that any contemporary constitutional settlement should go back to the lines of that era. That would be ridiculous. Moreover it is widely admitted that the coastal population of the eastern littoral in Kandyan times (1590s–1815) were Tamil speakers. In this sense *the eastern littoral* can be regarded as a 'traditional habitat' of Sri Lankan Tamils.⁶⁷ However to admit this does not mean that one should accept the

⁶³ K. Indrapala, 'Dravidian Settlements in Ceylon and the Beginnings Of the Kingdom Of Jaffna' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1965), pp.273, 282. Also see K. Indrapala, 'Early Tamil Settlements in Ceylon', in *Journal Of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*, n.s., Vol.13 (1969), pp.43–63. Significantly, Indrapala's dissertation held in the library of the University of London has disappeared since I worked through it in 1995. Quite poignantly, Indrapala, who is Sri Lankan Tamil by upbringing, retired prematurely from academia after rising to the position of Dean of the Arts Faculty at the University of Jaffna and has since become a recluse in Sydney. I suspect that it is the weight of pressures from within community that enforced these directions in his life.

⁶⁴ Ray (ed.), *History of Ceylon, Vol.1, Part 1*, pp.33–40, 66, 82–3; and Paranavitana, *Sigiri Graffiti*, pp.xii–xxxii, clxxi–clxxv, ccxiii–ccxv, ccxvi–ccxxi, esp. paras. 198, 565, 714 and 718–21. Most of the graffiti have been dated in the eighth and ninth centuries, though a few are said to be tenth century inscriptions.

⁶⁵ The only passing comment in *TN* is late in the day and not all that explicit. See p.176.

⁶⁶ See any history of the Portuguese period (1505–1656) and the maps attached to them; for example, Maps 1 and 2 in G.H. Peiris, *Development and Change in Sri Lanka* (Kandy: ICES, 1996), p.17. Also see Donald Ferguson, *The Earliest Dutch Visits to Ceylon* (Delhi: Asian Educational Services, repr., 1998). Indeed, the rulers of the Kingdom of Kotte claimed authority over the whole island and the terms *Sinhalaya*, *Sinhalē*, *Tunsinhalaya* etc. expressed this *cakravarti* notion. Thus, a form of 'ritual sovereignty' operated. See 'Sri Lanka in the Early 16th Century: Political Conditions', in K.M. de Silva (ed.), *History Of Sri Lanka Vol. II* (Colombo: Sridevi, 1995), p.11. I would call it 'tributary overlordship' based on rites of gift-giving homage. This is a complex issue that I cannot develop here.

⁶⁷ Indeed, if one goes further back in time to the era of the Rajarata civilisation in, say, the fifth to twelfth centuries CE, as Wilson and every Sri Lankan knows only too well, the eastern regions as well as the Jaffna Peninsula were 'the traditional habitat' of Sinhala speakers. 'Tradition' and 'history' constitute a cake that can be cut in many ways.

boundaries of the Eastern Province drawn by the British in the nineteenth century as an adequate marker of Tamil country. Both this boundary and the internal 'district' boundaries within that province are arbitrary lines on a map. To render them natural and fixed in stone is to be simple-minded and mechanistic. Unfortunately, scholars as well as politicians have been seduced by these administrative categories until Gerald Peiris brought them into question in 1985.⁶⁸ When I used the population figures for the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai to reveal the expansion of the Sinhalese in these regions between 1921 and 1971,⁶⁹ I was among those who fell prey to the power of bureaucratic categories. In effect, I was naturalising governmental artefact.

What such data does not disclose is the fact that the western strip of land running north–south in the interior of the Eastern Province was part of dry zone country that was malaria-ridden and sparsely-populated (for the most part) till the mid twentieth century. Thus, Henry Ward's journeys in this particular area during the 1850s highlighted its desolation and emptiness.⁷⁰ This situation lasted well into the twentieth century until the anti-malaria campaign took effect. Several of the villages along this western strip are also known to be *purāna* (old, traditional) villages of Sinhala speakers. However, ethnic identity may have been relatively labile in such isolated places where people eke out an existence.⁷¹ The Sinhala speakers could easily have been of Vadda descent and are likely to have acknowledged relationships with nearby Vadda or Tamil villagers. This argument, of course, cuts three ways: it would also apply to villagers deemed 'Tamil' or

⁶⁸ See G.H. Peiris, 'An Appraisal Of the Concept Of a Traditional Homeland', mimeo paper presented in 1985 at the National Workshop on the Economic Dimensions of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, ICES, which then informed the 1987 work by K.M. de Silva, *The 'Traditional Homelands' Of the Tamils* (Kandy: ICES. rev. 2nd ed. 1995), and that of Vidyamali Samarasinghe, 'Ethno-Regionalism as a Basis for Geographical Separation in Sri Lanka', in *Ethnic Studies Report*, Vol.6 (July 1988), pp.24–51. Indeed, one of the key features of K.M. de Silva's booklet is the series of figs. 4 to 6 by Gerald Peiris. For printed versions of this seminal article, see G.H. Peiris, 'An Appraisal Of the Concept Of a Traditional Homeland', in *Ethnic Studies Report*, Vol.9 (1991), pp.13–39; and for further work see G. Peiris, 'Irrigation, Land Distribution and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: An Evaluation Of Criticisms, with Special Reference to the Mahaveli Programme', in *Ethnic Studies Report*, Vol.12 (1995), pp.43–88; and G.H. Peiris, 'An Appraisal Of the Concept Of a Traditional Homeland in Sri Lanka', *Island* (24 Mar. 1999). The latter article is a measured demolition of the 1990 attempts by Peebles and Shastri in the *Journal of Asian Studies* to rebut his original article, while also pinpointing errors in C. Manogaran's *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

⁶⁹ Roberts, 'Meanderings in the Pathways', pp.74–5.

⁷⁰ *Volume Of Speeches and Minutes Of Sir Henry Ward* (Colombo, 1864). It is to Farmer's credit that he read Ward's Minutes on his journeys in the Eastern Province of that day. See B.H. Farmer, *Pioneer Peasant Colonization in Ceylon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp.102n, 105n.

⁷¹ See the detailed description of the village of Panama in Nur Yalman, *Under the Bo Tree. Studies in Caste, Kinship, Marriage in the Interior Of Ceylon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp.310–24. Also see Jon Dart, 'The Coast Veddas: Dimensions Of Marginality', in K.N.O. Dharmadasa and S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe (eds), *The Vanishing Aborigines* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing for ICES, 1990), pp.67–83; and Gananath Obeyesekere, 'The Historical Implications Of Vadda Ethnicity', paper presented to the Neelan Tiruchelvam Commemoration Symposium, 31 Jan. 2000.

‘Vadda’.⁷² Such data must necessarily circumscribe the implications of Peiris’ cartographical and other findings.⁷³

Wilson simply ignores the work of Peiris and K.M. de Silva, though some of their publications are part of his bibliography. He also seems unaware of the work of Samaraweera and Moore. He provides a statistical picture of an encroaching Sinhala population through the use of census data between 1953 and 1981 and a map that provides percentage differences between 1911 and 1981 (p.87). Further grounding for this argument is provided by the contention that prime minister Dudley Senanayake recognised that the Northern and Eastern Provinces were ‘a Tamil preserve and a Tamil homeland’ when he fashioned an alliance with the Federal Party in 1965 (p.97). Throughout the book the Northern and Eastern Provinces are presented as ‘Tamil districts’ or as ‘traditional homelands’ (e.g. pp.85, 115–17, 120, 122, 145). Whether by design or accidentally, this has the effect of naturalising the claim through repetition.

The idea seems to have been welded deeply into Wilson’s own thinking. In his brief review of D.S. Senanayake’s policies in the 1940s he asserts that Senanayake ‘had a concealed agenda’ involving the ‘colonisation of the Tamil homelands’ (p.71). This is a reiteration of the unsubstantiated verdict presented previously in *Break-up* (1988) where he argues that the land settlement programme ‘set in motion’ by Senanayake constituted ‘a threat to what had hitherto been an *unexpressed* right of possession by the Tamils of the Northern and Eastern Provinces as their homelands’.⁷⁴ On that occasion as well, therefore, one has an ambit claim of that day inscribed as an accepted ‘fact’. It is, rather, a figment of Wilson’s imagination—albeit one that derives its inspiration from an invention by Chelvanayakam and his supporters within the Federal Party of 1949–51 as part of their partisan politics. Against this categorical assertion, I assert—just as categorically—that this belief was not widely shared elsewhere in the country, not even by the several Tamil administrators overseeing lands settlement policy (see next paragraph). But, repetition implants. The type of opinion held by Wilson is, today, a fixed part of Tamilian grievances, espoused by extremists as well as by some moderates.

The implementation of colonisation policy needs careful revisiting by researchers

⁷² On the processes by which Vaddas were incorporated as Buddhists and Sinhalese in recent centuries, see G. Obeyesekere, ‘Where have all the Vāddas gone? Buddhism and Aboriginality in Sri Lanka’, in Neluka Silva (ed.), *The Hybrid Island* (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 2002), pp.1–19.

⁷³ Quite independently, Peiris himself stressed that his findings are ‘subject to all the limitations attached to census data’. Personal communication, Mar. 2002.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *Break-up*, p.37 (emphasis added). Also see pp.30, 38, 60, 73, 75.

who are willing to attend to both temporal and regional specificities. At the moment, my impressions⁷⁵ lead me to question Wilson's attribution of conspiracy to D.S. Senanayake on several grounds. Firstly, I suspect that he is committing the cardinal error of reading developments in the period beginning with C.P. de Silva's oversight of colonisation policy (1956 onwards) back into the 1930s and 1940s. Secondly, he has not read B.H. Farmer's path-finding work, *Pioneer Peasant Colonisation* (1957).⁷⁶ In the third place, he does not attend to the overriding perspectives that informed both Senanayake and the key officials who moulded peasant colonisation in the two decades 1935–55. These men acted as 'Ceylonese'. They did not conceive of the Eastern Province or the relevant portions of the Northern Province as 'Tamil districts'. Their conceptualisation was guided by the distinction between the 'wet zone' and the 'dry zone'. Accordingly, peasant settlement schemes of state-aided colonisation were directed by a combination of three motivations/goals: (a) to increase the food supply by expanding paddy production; (b) to reduce landlessness and relieve population pressure in the south-western region of the island and specific areas within the Central Highlands; and (c) to emulate the 'glorious kings' of the past, such as Parakramabahu of Polonnaruva, by rejuvenating the country's irrigation civilisation.⁷⁷ Fourthly, to invest Senanayake with ulterior motives⁷⁸ is to treat a whole array of decent and excellent administrators, several of them Tamil, as catspaws, fools and/or manipulators. I refer here to such individuals as Edmund Rodrigo, G.L.D. Davidson, Frank Leach, L.J. de S. Seneviratne, Sri Kantha, K. Kanagasundram⁷⁹ and M. Rajendra who were intimately associated with the initial land settlement efforts.⁸⁰ Finally,

⁷⁵ While granting that I must re-visit the literature and the evidence, these are based on memories of readings over the years that encompass Sir Hugh Clifford, 'Some Reflections on the Ceylon Land Question', in *Tropical Agriculturist*, Vol. LXVIII (1927), pp.290–2; the report of the Land Commission published as *Sessional Paper XVIII of 1929*; Farmer, *Pioneer Peasant Colonization in Ceylon*; and Vijaya Samaraweera, 'Land Policy and Peasant Colonization', in K.M. de Silva (ed.), *History of Ceylon. Vol. 3* (University of Ceylon Press Board, 1973), pp.446–60; as well as my recollections of interviews in the late 1960s with former Ceylon civil servants (see fn. 80 below).

⁷⁶ Farmer's coverage is comprehensive and encompassed implementation as well as policy. To the best of my knowledge there was no other work of this sort anywhere in Asia at this time. Farmer also inspired a generation of scholars working on agrarian transformation in South Asia within Britain, for example Gerald Peiris, John Harriss, Barbara Harriss, Robert Chambers, and Madduma Bandara.

⁷⁷ It would be feasible to suggest that during the time of the British occupation most Ceylonese took pride in the achievements of the Rajarata civilisation. Thus, see Arunachalam's note to himself: 'what a glorious thing it would be for Ceylon to emulate and excel her glorious past' (diary extract according to notes taken by James T. Rutnam). Again, the research that resulted in the book *People Inbetween* indicated that most Burghers and others regarded 'Ceylon' as a Sinhala country. I did not take specific references, however, because it was not an interest I was pursuing then.

⁷⁸ Other than Farmer's *Pioneer Peasant Colonization in Ceylon* (esp. pp.141–60), other reviews of early land settlement policy can be located in Samaraweera, 'Land Policy and Peasant Colonization'; and Mick Moore, *The State and Peasant Politics in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.35–49, 95–8, 164–6, 196–201.

⁷⁹ Significantly, Kanagasundram 'helped greatly with the contents' of the chapter in Farmer's book titled 'Achievement in Colonization, 1931–1953'. See Farmer, *Pioneer Peasant Colonization in Ceylon*, p.142n.

⁸⁰ Other than Kanagasundram who had died prematurely, I interviewed every one of those named, as well as A.N. Strong and C.E. Tilney, during the Roberts Oral History Project of the late 1960s.

Wilson reveals no awareness of the antecedents of the settlement policy in the 1920s and the critical place of both the Land Settlement Ordinance of 1931 and the Land Development Ordinance of 1935 (LDO) as its foundation. Behind the latter act was the preference for a peasant yeomanry displayed by a long line of British officers,⁸¹ a leaning that reached its fruition in the work of C.V. Brayne and A.N. Strong in the 1920s. This influence dominated the work of the Land Commission of the late 1920s and secured a wholehearted response from D.S. Senanayake—both are reflective of romantic inspirations and of the political pragmatism of a conservative capitalist. Drawing the long bow, indeed, it could be said that the LDO was Brayne's brainchild (pun intended).⁸²

D.S. Senanayake may have treated the 'Indian Tamils' as aliens and been suspicious of India. He may have harboured some of the standard assumptions of so many Sinhalese of his generation, such as the conviction that Sri Lanka was a Sinhala country by and large.⁸³ But, unless new evidence is forthcoming, for the moment we must say that (a) in the anti-colonial context of the early twentieth century most men and women of the Western-educated classes did not conceive of the Sri Lanka Tamils as anything but Ceylonese; and that (b) *any conspiratorial theory that regards colonisation policy in the period 1920s to 1955 as a land-grabbing exercise remains unsubstantiated.*

In overview, then, the contention that the Northern and Eastern Provinces are 'traditional homelands' of the Sri Lanka Tamils is sustained in *TN* by a thin veneer of evidence, the naturalisation of bureaucratic categories and a measure of historical manipulation. This engineering includes *the non-disclosure of facts that are widely known to older generations*, but which are not widely diffused among newer generations (see fn. 62). Nor does *TN* address counter arguments in publications that would have been known to Wilson.⁸⁴ These essays may have been from the other side of the political fence, but Wilson should have at least acknowledged them and tried to come up with a rebuttal. The only conclusion that one can draw is that personal subjectivity intrudes. In these particular measures of commission and omission, Wilson does a disservice to his own record of distinguished and solid scholarship. For me, personally, this is a sad epitaph to pen with reference to a person I liked so much.

⁸¹ Lal Jayawardena, 'The Supply Of Sinhalese Labour to Ceylon Plantations (1830-1930). A Study in Imperial Policy in a Peasant Society' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1963); and my recollections from pertinent interviews during the Roberts Oral History Project.

⁸² My interview with G.L.D. Davidson, 9 Dec. 1965; Samaraweera, 'Land Policy and Peasant Colonization', pp.450-1; and Moore, *The State and Peasant Politics in Sri Lanka*, pp.38-9.

⁸³ Thus during one of our conversations Godfrey Gunatilleke (himself a district land officer in the 1950s) noted in passing that his father (a Sinhala Catholic who was by no means chauvinist) adhered to this assumption. Also see Arasaratnam's reading of the ideological foundations supporting the Sinhala-only forces of the 1950s. See Arasaratnam, 'Nationalism, Communalism and National Unity in Ceylon', p.265.

⁸⁴ C.R. de Silva, *Sri Lanka. A History*; and Peiris, 'An Appraisal Of the Concept Of a Traditional Homeland'.