

## **The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka**

KRISTIAN STOKKE AND ANNE KIRSTI RYNTVEIT

**ABSTRACT** Regionalism has commonly been expected to dissolve as a consequence of the administrative regional penetration of the centralized modern state and the homogenizing forces associated with modernization. This mode of reasoning has reappeared recently among authors who see globalization as a universal force that will eradicate regional economic inequalities, local identities and regional political mobilization. Contrary to these expectations, regional autonomy movements continue to play a central political role within many states. Consequently, it remains an important analytical challenge to understand the construction and politicization of regional interests.

Against this background, the article presents a critical interpretation and contextual analysis of Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka. It is argued that studies of nationalist movements should seek inspiration in the contemporary dialog between three main perspectives on social movements (theories of new social movements, resource mobilization theories, and theories of collective identity) and a corresponding three-dimensional understanding of place (location, locale, and sense of place). The paper shows how nationalist mobilization cannot be reduced to essentialist notions of primordial nations, territorial nation-states, or internal colonialism, but instead should be understood as the outcome of cultural and political practices by a multitude of actors, operating in time- and place-specific contexts.

**S**ri Lanka experienced sporadic spontaneous and organized riots against Tamils in the late 1950s, the late 1970s, and the early 1980s. Since 1983 the country has been in a state of civil war between the Sinhalese-dominated state and various militant Tamil groups fighting for a separate Tamil state (Tamil Eelam) in the northern and eastern regions. The last fifteen years have also been marked by internal warfare within this proclaimed Tamil homeland between competing militant Tamil separatist groups as well as violence against

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Tamil-speaking Muslims by the dominant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Between 1987 and 1990, there was also open warfare between the LTTE, covertly supported with arms from the Sinhalese-dominated government, and a peace-keeping force from India, the traditional patron of the Tamil nationalist movement. Simultaneously, the Sinhalese-dominated state was brought close to collapse in an armed conflict with a Sinhalese nationalist movement in the southern, western and central regions, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front, JVP). After 1990, several of the militant Tamil separatist groups have collaborated with the armed forces of the state in the war against the LTTE. In short, post-colonial Sri Lanka has been marked by ethno-national polarization and conflict, and by intra-ethnic violence and changing political alliances across ethno-national and regional boundaries.

Against this background, this article presents a critical interpretation of the making and radicalization of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. This interpretation, which is inspired by the contemporary dialog between different approaches to social movements, has a threefold focus: (1) the social and regional construction of the Tamil nation, (2) the socio-spatial basis of Tamil nationalism, and (3) the availability of mobilizing structures and political opportunities for the nationalist movement. The basic argument here is that the Tamil nation should be understood as a modern social and regional construction, and Tamil nationalism as a set of post-colonial political strategies which have been utilized by various actors operating within specific socio-spatial and political contexts. Although the same argument applies to Sinhalese nationalism (Stokke 1998), this article will focus primarily on the Tamil minority.

### **Political Geography and Nationalist Movements**

Taylor (1993) argues that traditional political geography, while analyzing the nexus of territory, state, and nation, has failed to critically examine nations and nationalism. Instead, the nation has been understood as a natural and permanent entity, and nation-states and nationalism as organic political expressions of primordial nations. This acceptance of the nation as a given unit also prevails among political geographers who are inspired by the world systems perspective within political economy. Their analyses tend to leave the origin of nations unexamined while emphasizing economic exploitation and political domination among nations and regions.

Recently, Painter (1995) has sought to outline an agenda for critical political geography based on a combination of non-deterministic political economy, the agency-orientation in structuration theory, and poststructuralist discourse analyses. Within this framework, nationalism becomes "a political project which is pursued by certain individuals and social groups within the nation on the basis of the resources they are able to mobilize" (Painter 1995: 170). One implication of this is that nationalist movements could be analyzed as a form of collective

action, using concepts developed within theories of social movements (Smith and Wilson 1997). Three main theoretical perspectives can be identified in the literature on social movements: (1) theories of new social movements, (2) resource mobilization theories, and (3) theories about the cultural construction of collective identities (Klandermans 1991). Theories of new social movements characteristically seek to identify the structural mechanisms behind the emergence of social grievances and collective action, e.g., economic and political marginalization (Castells 1983, 1997; Touraine 1981). Resource mobilization theories are less concerned with the structural determination of protest but focus instead on the availability of *mobilizing resources*, e.g., informal social networks and formal bureaucratic organizations, and *political opportunity structures*, e.g., political alliances with state institutions and elite groups, which facilitate social movements (McAdam et al. 1996; Tarrow 1998). Finally, cultural theories of social movements emphasize the social construction of collective identities through negotiations over the goals, means, and environment for collective action (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Melucci 1989, 1996). There is a growing consensus that these approaches complement each other in the sense that they address different issues and scales of analysis.

Regarding the geography of social movements, Routledge (1992) points out that these main approaches lend themselves to different concepts of place. Agnew's (1987) distinction between location, locale, and sense of place is found to be especially useful here. "Location" refers to the ways in which economic and political relations create uneven regional development. Such economic and political relations produce place-specific bases for collective action. "Locale" refers to place as an arena for formal and informal social relations, interactions, networks, and organizations. This creates place-specific mobilizing structures for collective action. "Sense of place" refers to socially constructed systems of meaning and identity associated with a locality. This produces place-specific cultural framing processes for collective action.

Miller (1994) points to the importance of scale in geographic analyses of social movements. With reference to political opportunity structures, he argues that collective actions may be directed towards the state level with the most favorable political structure. Similar arguments regarding the importance of scale could be developed regarding the socio-spatial basis of collective action (location) and systems of meaning and identity (sense of place).

Location, locale, and sense of place represent geographic dimensions of the processes that are emphasized in each of the three main approaches to social movements. Agnew points out that the three dimensions of place, like the three approaches to social movements, are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The challenge, according to Routledge (1992), is to analyze the role of location, locale, and sense of place in concrete cases of collective action. The following sections seek to outline the basic elements of such a three-dimensional

understanding of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. This analysis is based on fieldwork in Sri Lanka over several years. Information has been gathered through extensive literature studies and qualitative interviews with representatives from militant Tamil separatist groups, elected Tamil political representatives, and leading Sri Lankan scholars.

### **Sense of Place: The Social and Regional Construction of the Tamil Nation**

Sri Lanka is marked by a diversity of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities. Some insight into this diversity can be gathered from general population statistics. The use of “ethnicity” as a practical category for census purposes is clearly problematic (Anderson 1991; Brubaker 1996). However, if, for the moment, these problems are ignored, it will be found that these sources reveal some characteristic features of Sri Lanka’s majority/minority-relations. The ethnic majority group, according to the most recent census in 1981, consists of Sinhalese (Department of Census and Statistics 1986). The majority within this group is Sinhala-speaking Buddhists, but there is an important minority who are Catholic and also a number of Sinhalese who use English as their first language. The ethnic minority consists primarily of groups who use Tamil as their first language. The Tamil-speaking population is commonly divided between Sri Lanka Tamils, Indian Tamils, and Sri Lanka Moors. Whereas most Sri Lanka Tamils and Indian Tamils are Hindu or Catholic, Sri Lanka Moors are largely Muslims. Sri Lanka Tamils constitute the majority in the northern region while also being strongly present in the eastern region and in the capital, Colombo (Figure 1). Indian Tamils reside mainly in the plantation areas of the central highlands. Sri Lanka Moors have a strong presence in the eastern region and in urban areas throughout the island.

The social and regional construction of the Tamil and Sinhalese nations revolves around the cores and boundaries of the Sinhalese and Tamil people and their traditional homelands. In broad outline, Sinhalese nationalists commonly claim that the undivided island is the homeland, *Dhamma Dipa*, for the Sinhalese people and their particularly authentic form of Theravada Buddhism. Tamil nationalists, on the other hand, hold it as unquestionable that the Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka constitute a separate nation and that their traditional settlement pattern outlines the boundaries of the Tamil homeland, or *Tamil Eelam*:

The island ... is the traditional homeland of two distinct nations—Tamil Eelam [Tamils] and Sri Lanka [Sinhalese], two distinct social formations with distinct cultures and languages having their own unique historical past. (Balasingham 1983, 5)

Major Ethnic Groups in Sri Lanka, 1981

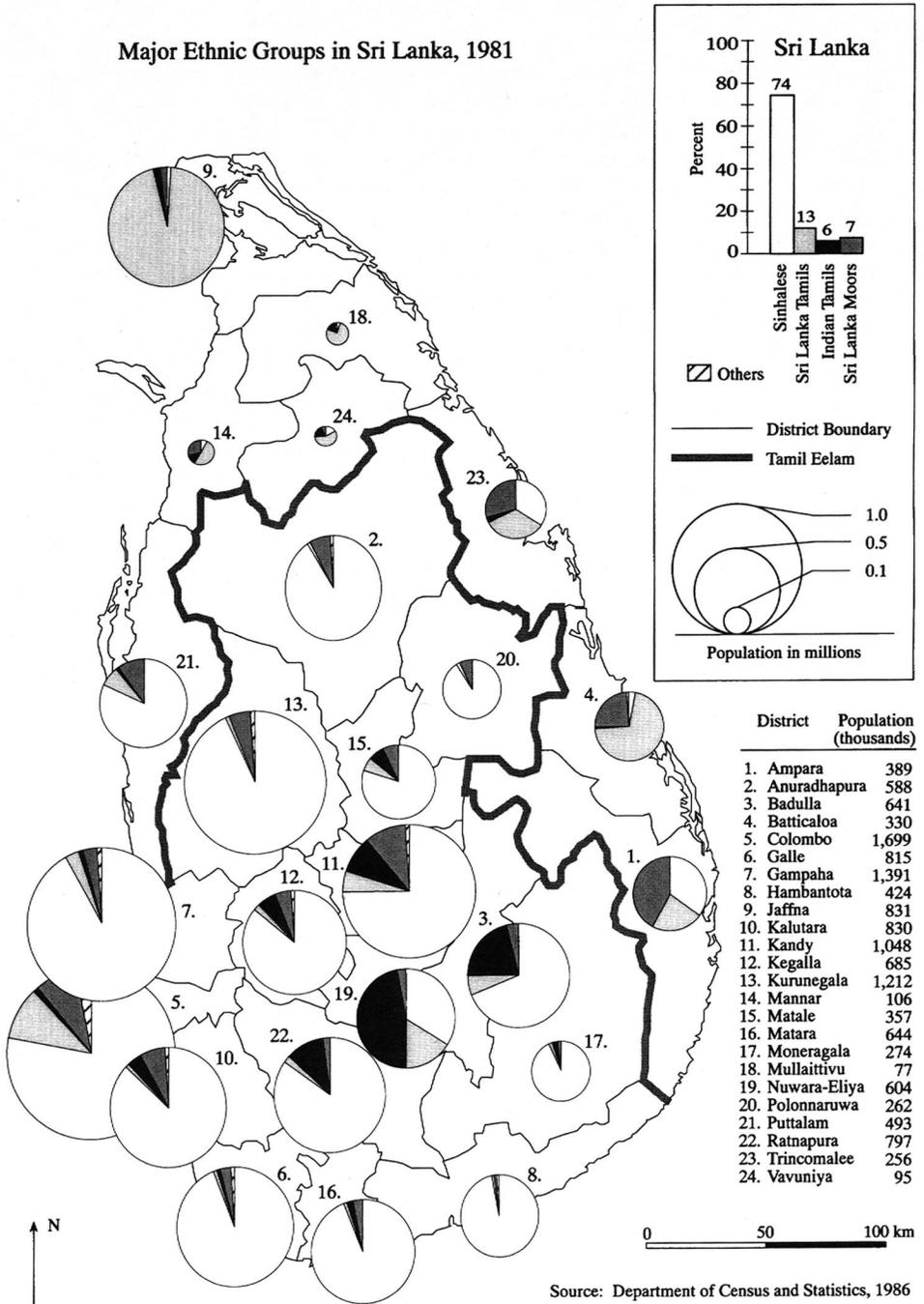


FIGURE 1. MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS IN SRI LANKA, 1981

While Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists portray their people and homelands as natural and permanent entities, historical evidence suggests that they should be understood as relatively recent social and regional constructions. Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1991) suggests that pre-existing cultural differences only became significant ethno-national boundary markers for a Tamil nation in the late nineteenth century. She finds that two competing constructions of 'Tamilness', one religious and one linguistic, emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The linguistic construction of Tamilness was particularly promoted by Western missionaries and Christian Tamils. The Christian missionaries had realized the necessity of teaching in the vernacular in order to obtain converts; they studied the Tamil language and classics, translated Christian texts into Tamil and fought the perceived degradation of the Tamil language (Arasaratnam 1994). This linguistic construction of Tamilness allowed Saivite Tamils to convert to Christianity without compromising their ethnic identity. However, there was also a religious revivalism against the perceived usurpation of language and culture by the Christian missionaries and the religious conversions among Saivite Tamils. This religious revivalist movement objected to the construction of Tamilness based solely on language and asserted that "being a Tamil meant being Saivite and speaking Tamil" (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1991: 31). It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the Tamil language, which has been the basis for the post-colonial construction of the Tamil nation, became the dominant boundary marker of Tamilness.

Both the religious and the linguistic construction of Tamilness were characterized by its inclusion of Tamils in India. From the late nineteenth century this changed markedly as a distinct Ceylon Tamil identity emerged. This was boosted by the administrative unification of the island from 1833, but was also facilitated by renewed interest in the history of Jaffna society stimulated by colonial discourses on the origin of the Tamil language. A series of historical studies of Jaffna were published between the 1870s and the 1920s. These 'histories of Jaffna' were normally based on myths and memories that had been collected in the *Yalppana Vaipava Malai*, a chronicle which had been written for the Dutch colonial administration in the early eighteenth century and was translated from Tamil as *The History of the Kingdom of Jaffna* in 1879. These historical 'discoveries' sought to uncover a particular Tamil history in Ceylon and thereby prove the Tamil's historical right to exist as a community in the island. In the process, they also promoted a distinct Ceylon Tamil identity which was relatively autonomous from South India (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994b).

These constructions were primarily concerned with the unity of Tamils. But by the turn of the century this had been transformed by discussions of linguistic, racial, and cultural superiority and inferiority of 'us' and 'them'. Polarized assertions about the origin and relative development of the Sinhalese and Tamil languages were linked with the relative statuses of 'races', so that "the alleged 'primitiveness' of a language ... was made the basis for value judgements about the 'race' ... that was presumed to speak this language" (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1991: 35). Simultaneously, Sinhalese and Tamil historical writings

began to emphasize an arch-enmity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and, in the process, gradually took on the character of nationalist historiographies (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1990a; Rogers 1990). This meant that it became increasingly difficult to acknowledge any common history and culture or to concede to the 'other' any positive role in the history of one's own group, despite growing historical evidence that indicated cultural interaction as much as cultural separation between the Tamils and the Sinhalese.

Whereas the studies of Tamil history and society facilitated the construction of a distinct Tamil identity in Ceylon, they also uncovered and even reinforced differences between categories of Tamils; between northern and eastern Tamils (Wilson 1994a), between Saivite Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims (Wagner 1991) and between Ceylon Tamils and Indian Tamils (Hollup 1994). This posed challenges to the construction of the category of Tamils and produced diverse experiences of inclusion and exclusion for different groups of Tamils. The construction of Tamilness in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries had centered on the northern region ('Jaffna Tamils'). However, it also included Tamils in the eastern region ('Batticaloa Tamils'), despite marked differences in caste, marriage, and kinship structures (McGilvray 1982; Pfaffenberger 1982). The same held true for Ceylon Tamils in government service in Colombo or Malaya. The Indian Tamils, on the other hand, who are descendants of South Indian plantation workers, were not granted the status of Ceylon Tamils. In this case, boundary markers such as caste, close links to India, their residence in the plantation areas of the central highlands, and their short history in the country, overruled the inclusive primary markers of language and religion. In the case of the Ceylon Moors, a community of Tamil-speaking Muslims mainly located in the eastern region, commonalities in terms of language, domicile, and social structures were taken as evidence for a shared ancestry. Hence, the Muslims were portrayed as Tamils who had converted to Islam and, therefore, included in the category of Ceylon Tamils. The Muslims themselves have vehemently denied any Tamil identity on the basis of shared descent and have instead maintained separate ethnic, religious, and political identities (Wagner 1991).

This means that the contemporary category of Ceylon Tamils had been largely constructed by the time of Independence in 1948. In the post-colonial period, the dominant Tamil nationalist organizations have sought to maximize the numerical and territorial strength of the Tamil nation by continuing the emphasis on the Tamil language as the prime boundary marker of Tamilness (Coomaraswamy 1987). The Federal Party, who spearheaded Tamil nationalism as a political project from the early 1950s, championed the cause of a 'Tamil-speaking nation' which explicitly included Ceylon Tamils, Sri Lanka Moors, and Indian Tamils (Wilson 1994b). The Tamil United Liberation Front, which dominated Tamil politics in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, brought together the political leadership of the Indian Tamils and the Ceylon Tamils in a joint parliamentary struggle for a separate Tamil Eelam. The militant separatist groups have also emphasized that the Tamil-speaking nation includes Tamil-speaking Muslims and Indian Tamils. Nevertheless, the Muslims and the Indian

Tamils have played a marginal role in the Tamil nationalist movement. Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka has remained a predominately Ceylon Tamil nationalism which has utilized the inclusive construction of a Tamil-speaking nation as a legitimizing device.

Whereas the construction of a distinct Ceylon Tamil category, with a territorial core in Jaffna, dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, the construction of distinct territorial boundaries for the Tamil homeland appears to be a post-colonial construction. Wilson (1994b) observes that the notion of a traditional homeland for the Tamil-speaking people was introduced to the political parlance by the Federal Party in the 1950s. In the context of the sovereign state, it became crucial for the success of the political project of Tamil ethno-nationalism to establish a territorial basis for the Tamil nation. While the exact boundaries of the Tamil homeland remained relatively unclear for a long period, the common assumption was that the desired federal system would decentralize state power to the Tamil-dominated Northern and Eastern Provinces (Figure 1). These provinces include the districts of Jaffna, Mannar, Mullaittivu, and Vavuniya (Northern Province), and the districts of Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee (Eastern Province). By the mid-1970s, as federalism gave way to Tamil separatism, exact boundaries of Tamil Eelam were needed and proclaimed (de Silva 1994; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1990b; Shastri 1990). Thus, the inaugural Vaddukodai resolution of the Tamil United Liberation Front in 1976 stated that the traditional Tamil homeland, which would form the basis for a separate Tamil Eelam, was defined by the traditional residential areas of the Tamil people and consisted of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. By the time of the election in 1977, the TULF had expanded this construction of Tamil territoriality to include the district of Puttalam. The territoriality of Tamil Eelam was now justified by the residential pattern of Tamils and the historical territoriality of the Jaffna kingdom. This construction of the Tamil homeland includes the core areas of Sri Lanka Tamils and Sri Lanka Moors but excludes the plantation areas where most of the Indian Tamils reside. It is a territorial construction that has been embraced by the dominant militant separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Other militant separatist groups, such as the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS), have also sought to incorporate the Indian Tamils in their construction of a Tamil homeland (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994a).

Hellmann-Rajanayagam's archival research shows that the construction of the Tamil nation came into being in the late 19th and early 20th century. This means that it is wrong to assert that contemporary Tamil nationalism represents an organic expression of the interests of a primordial Tamil nation. However, it is equally wrong to see the Tamil nation as an artificial invention by post-colonial elite groups since the construction of the Tamil nation, if not the exact boundaries of the Tamil homeland, actually preceded Tamil ethno-nationalist politics. The Tamil nation arose as an imagined community (Anderson 1991) in the context of colonial discourses on nations and national characteristics and

colonial social and political changes. This colonial construction of Tamilness was primarily an intellectual project for the Tamil elite with relatively limited social and political significance. This means that it does not in itself provide a fulfilling explanation for the making and radicalization of Tamil ethno-nationalist politics. The construction of the Tamil nation and the Tamil homeland rendered, however, a repository of ethno-national myths and symbols that could be mobilized and refined for post-colonial political purposes.

### **Location: The Socio-spatial Basis of Tamil Nationalism**

One of the main inspirations for the revival of political geography in the 1980s was the world systems perspective within political economy. Analyses of nationalism within this approach have identified internal colonialism, i.e., economic exploitation and political domination among majority and minority nations in core and peripheral regions, as the socio-spatial basis for nationalist movements (Blaut 1987; Drakakis-Smith and Williams 1983). Proclaimed internal colonialism has also been used by nationalists as a legitimization for the social struggle of minority groups. This is not the least the case with Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka.

Tamil nationalists commonly claim that the socio-spatial basis of Tamil nationalism lies in the Sinhalese majority's internal colonialism of the Tamil minority and their traditional homeland (Shastri 1990). The events and processes that are presented as evidence for this overall structure of economic oppression and political domination, include: (1) the denial of citizenship to Indian Tamils; (2) Sinhalese land colonization in Tamil areas; (3) Sinhala as the only official language; (4) discrimination of Tamils in public sector employment; (5) 'standardization' of university admission which favors the Sinhalese; (6) lack of public investments for regional development in the Tamil areas; (7) a series of broken Sinhalese-Tamil pacts; and (8) sporadic and systematic anti-Tamil violence (Balasingham 1983; Ponnambalam 1983). These events and processes add up to a multidimensional "oppression of a big nation against a small nation perpetrated within the power structure of a unitary state" (Balasingham 1983, 35). According to this view, Tamil nationalism has emerged and been radicalized as an inevitable outcome of internal colonialism: "the escalating dialectic of oppression and resistance was leading to a level of national oppression which could only be met by armed revolutionary struggle" (Ponnambalam 1983, 201). The events and processes mentioned above have certainly had negative consequences for specific groups of Tamils. Nevertheless, to characterize the relations between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka as a simple matter of internal colonialism is to ignore the profound social stratification, and hence diverse experiences of social change, within both the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities (Stokke 1998). In this context, arguments about internal colonialism represent a strategic essentialism deployed by Tamil

nationalists rather than an accurate representation of economic, social and political relations in Sri Lanka. This calls for a more specific analysis of the socio-spatial basis of Tamil nationalism.

To speak of Tamil nationalism in the singular is to neglect the existence of two distinct Tamil nationalisms in the post-colonial period. The first one is the parliamentary nationalism that dominated Tamil politics from the mid-1950s till the late 1970s (Wilson 1994b). This was an elite-led nationalism from 'above' that was initiated by Colombo-based Tamils. The second is the militant Tamil separatist nationalism that emerged in the 1970s and dominated Tamil politics from the early 1980s (Swamy 1994). This has been spearheaded by middle-class youth in opposition to both the Sinhalese-dominated state and the established Tamil political elite. There are obvious continuities, particularly ideological ones, between the two nationalisms. However, there are also clear differences in the goals, means, organization and socio-spatial basis of the two nationalisms (Table 1).

Parliamentarian Tamil nationalism emerged in a particular economic, social and political context in the early post-colonial period. Sri Lankan society was at the time of independence in 1948 characterized by a relatively prosperous and export-dependent agrarian economy, striking class-divisions in society, and a political polarization between an assimilated and conservative multi-ethnic dominant class and an equally assimilated and class-conscious multi-ethnic urban working class (Uyangoda 1992). The numerically strong rural middle and lower middle classes were to a large extent absent from the institutionalized political system. Ethnic animosities certainly existed within both the dominant and the subordinate classes. Disagreements over the mode of political representation had created a division within the political elite between the Sinhalese-dominated United National Party (UNP) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC). Nevertheless, both the real and the imagined political conflicts at the time of independence were primarily between opposing class forces rather than between ethnic groups (Jayawardena 1985). In this context, Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism emerged as top-down strategies for political mobilization among the middle classes through the construction of ethno-national class alliances (Stokke 1998). This process was initiated by the UNP and the ACTC in the transition period from British colonialism to independence (Moore 1985). From the mid-1950s, it was systematically utilized by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike among the Sinhalese and the Federal Party (FP) under the leadership of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam among the Tamils (Manor 1989; Wilson 1994b). This ethno-nationalist strategy for political mobilization turned out to be extremely successful and SLFP and FP soon replaced the UNP and ACTC as the dominant political parties. The principal material and symbolic means for ethnonationalist

TABLE 1. CHRONICLE

YEAR	IMPORTANT EVENTS	GOALS AND MEANS	DOMINANT ORGANIZATIONS
1948	Independence	Goal: Responsive cooperation	All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC)
1952	Federal Party founded	Means: Parliamentary negotiations	
1956	“Sinhala only” introduced Anti-Tamil riots	Goal: Federalism Means: Parliamentary negotiations	Federal Party (FP)
1970	“Standardization” introduced		
1972	Constitutional reform		
1976	TULF founded	Goal: Separatism	Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)
1977	Anti-Tamil riots	Means: Parliamentary negotiations	
1983	Anti-Tamil riots Eelam War I India offers arms and training	Goal: Separatism Means: Armed struggle	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE)
1986	Violent internal rivalry		Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO)
1987	Indo-Lankan Peace Accord		Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF)
1990	IPKF forced to withdraw Eelam War II LTTE attacks Muslim Civilians		Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS)
1994	Peace negotiations		Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
1995	Eelam War III		

mobilization among the Sinhalese were distribution of social welfare goods and agricultural land to the marginalized rural lower middle-classes and assertions about the importance of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities and rights. Among the Tamils, ethnonationalist political mobilization revolved around a defensive Tamil nationalist ideology that was constructed around the notion of a national unity of all Tamil-speaking people, the interlinked notion of a traditional Tamil homeland and claims regarding actual and potential Sinhalese national oppression of the Tamil nation and colonization of the Tamil homeland (Wilson 1994b). While Sinhalese nationalist mobilization targeted the rural lower middle classes, Tamil nationalism sought to mobilize middle class constituencies within which a significant portion sought to achieve public sector employment through higher education. The prime issue that triggered Tamil nationalism was the question of official language. When Sinhala became the only official language in 1956, the anger and frustration among the Tamil dominant and middle classes grew dramatically, especially in Colombo and Jaffna, and the political project of the FP gained legitimacy.

Militant Tamil separatist nationalism emerged from a quite different economic, social, and political context. The politics of ethno-national class alliances had produced a hegemonic political project of democratic socialism which was based on heavy taxation of export-oriented plantation agriculture and state investments in import-substitution industries. As these accumulation strategies were constrained by negative trends in international prices, domestic market saturation, and lack of competitiveness, the Sri Lankan economy entered into a deep economic crisis with extremely high levels of unemployment, especially among educated middle and lower middle class youth (Nithiyanandan 1987). Access to valuable public sector positions became a question of political connections rather than educational attainment within a system marked by political patronage (Pfaffenberger 1990). This provided the immediate structural basis for the emergence of militant youth groups from the subordinate classes within both the Sinhalese and the Tamil class alliances in the early 1970s. The Sinhalese-dominated government was challenged by an armed insurgency by the JVP, a Sinhalese new left movement of un- and underemployed rural lower middle-class youth (Gunaratna 1990). On the Tamil side, militant nationalist groups based in the Jaffna district started to attack government institutions and representatives in the early 1970s while also criticizing the politics of the Tamil elite. The response from the Tamil political elite to this challenge from below was to radicalize their nationalist political demands. Whereas the ACTC had rallied for collaboration, the FP had championed the cause of federalism. In the 1970s, the FP turned away from federalism and began to advocate Tamil separatism. In response to the nationalist mobilization by the militant youth and the political exclusion of the Tamil elite from the political bargaining process, the Tamil political elite joined forces in TULF in 1975 and adopted a resolution

demanding a Tamil separate state, Tamil Eelam, in 1976. The problem for the Tamil political elite, however, was the lack of a viable strategy for delivering the sought-for Tamil Eelam. TULF's strategy was to use the separatist demand, and also the presence of militant groups, to obtain a degree of political autonomy for the Tamil-dominated areas. As it turned out, this was not a viable strategy in dealing with a Sinhalese majority government preoccupied with maintaining its own political legitimacy. In the context of continued economic and legitimization crises, the SLFP- and UNP-led governments of the 1970s and 1980s continued to rely on a set of 'carrot and stick' policies: a combination of material and symbolic concessions to more narrowly defined political client groups and increased coercion against both the Sinhalese and Tamil political opposition. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, militant Tamil youth groups and Tamil civilians increasingly became the targets of state coercion and even state-sponsored anti-Tamil riots (Stokke 1997). In this situation, the traditional Tamil political elite was politically marginalized while the militant separatist movements of Tamil youth gained political legitimacy among Sri Lanka Tamils. The socio-spatial basis of militant Tamil nationalism was now broadened from the initial core of educated middle class youth from Jaffna to include Sri Lanka Tamils in the eastern region, Indian Tamils and Sri Lanka Moors from a range of social classes (Swamy 1994). As the initial optimism of militant separatism gave way to harsh repression and internal warfare between different separatist organizations, the socio-spatial basis of militant nationalism has again become more narrow. In recent years, LTTE has primarily recruited among young school children in the northern region (Hoole et al. 1992). Nevertheless, LTTE enjoys a certain support by a wide range of Tamil groups, as it remains the only organization that is capable of fighting the armed forces of the repressive state. One respondent describes the situation as such:

There are people who are giving them [LTTE] a sort of "negative support" They are also facing an oppressive state. So they are not saying that LTTE's politics is right. The majority of the people, although they don't like certain things, because there is threat all the time and because there is no political solution or anything, they feel that if the LTTE is also gone we don't have anything at all. If you are there in Jaffna, unless you are very politically conscious, you don't want to think about alternatives, because there are no alternatives. You have seen in the front of your eyes what happened to so many alternative movements.

This short outline indicates that Tamil nationalism should be understood as a post-colonial political phenomenon. While the early post-colonial period was dominated by an elite-led parliamentary Tamil nationalism, the later period has been dominated by a militant Tamil separatist nationalism. Whereas the former was a strategy for political mobilization from 'above' and from the political center in Colombo, the latter represents an oppositional movement of

economically and politically marginalized Tamil youth from the political periphery in the northern and eastern regions.

### **Locale: Mobilizing Structures and Political Opportunities**

Studies of nationalist movements have normally focused on the socio-spatial basis of the movements and the social and regional construction of national identities. The emphasis in resource mobilization theory on locale-specific mobilizing structures and political opportunity structures has to a large extent been ignored. This is a serious omission in the case of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka.

The two Tamil nationalisms have been facilitated by quite different mobilizing structures and political opportunity structures. Parliamentary nationalism relied primarily on informal networks based on occupation, kinship, caste, and place within the elite. Informal networks were produced and reproduced through a number of institutions in political and civil society, not the least through marriage alliances, professional associations, and elitist institutions of higher education (Wilson 1994b). These networks played themselves out in specific locales. Tamil politics in the early decades of the twentieth century was dominated by Colombo-based elite groups. After independence, there was a transfer of Tamil political hegemony to an equally elitist segment of Jaffna Tamil society (Wilson 1994a). In Jaffna, the *Vellalar* (farmer) caste has to a large extent controlled land ownership, capital, commerce, administrative positions, and political offices (Pfaffenberger 1994). In addition to informal networks based on such identities within the elite, parliamentary Tamil nationalism also relied on vertical patron-client networks that cut across social stratification based on caste and class. After 1956, as the state expanded under the development policies of 'democratic socialism', local patron-client relations based on personal wealth and colonial administrative positions were gradually replaced by patronage based on access to the resources of the post-colonial state.

The principal political opportunity structure that facilitated the general and specific patronage politics of parliamentary Tamil nationalism was the balance of power between two major Sinhalese parties (UNP and SLFP). Both parties have utilized Sinhalese nationalist strategies to win the support of the Sinhalese middle and lower middle classes. However, as long as neither one could achieve a majority alone, they have in practical terms come to rely on formal and informal coalitions with the ethnic minority parties (de Silva 1993). Consequently, the traditional Tamil political leadership could realistically hope for a reasonable settlement of Tamil grievances through political negotiations and participate in the practices of dispersing patronage to their client constituencies. Although nationalist analyses of Tamil political history have emphasized the post-colonial exclusion and oppression of Tamils, it is clear that this balance of power ensured a degree of political participation and social

redistribution also among Tamils (Wilson 1994b). These political opportunity structures disintegrated after the election in 1970 when the economic crisis produced a landslide victory for a SLFP-led electoral coalition. Given this clear majority for the government coalition, their unwillingness to negotiate with the Tamil politicians due to the FP's collaboration with the UNP in the previous period and the government's 'carrot and stick' policies after the JVP-uprising in 1971, the traditional Tamil political elite became marginalized observers in the political process from the early 1970s.

The mobilizing structures and political opportunity structures of the militant Tamil nationalist movement were quite different from those of parliamentary nationalism. The militant movement originated from two main locales; the institutions of higher education and the town of Valvettithurai in the northern part of the Jaffna peninsula. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, institutions of higher education in Sri Lanka and in London functioned as a prime mobilizing structure through a multitude of student networks and associations. This changed to a certain extent in the late 1980s when many students became disillusioned by the internal rivalry between different militant organizations. At this point recruitment shifted to lower levels of the education system (Hoole et al. 1992). The other prime locale has been the town of Valvettithurai on the north coast of the Jaffna peninsula. This fishing village is generally considered to be a center of smuggling from India. Various observers have emphasized that this locale could function as a prime mobilizing site, both because of this tradition of resistance against the state, and because Valvettithurai is dominated by the *Karyar* caste (fishermen), the only caste that can rival the dominance of the Vellalar caste in Tamil society. It is commonly argued that informal social networks which coincide with this caste identity have functioned as an informal mobilizing network for some of the militant separatist organizations, particularly the LTTE in the early years.

The political opportunity structures that facilitated the rise of militant Tamil nationalism were located in India and particularly in Tamil Nadu. Due to the political structures of legitimacy and competition in Tamil Nadu, there was a considerable room for maneuver for militant Tamils groups in the 1980s (Gunaratna 1993). At the national level, the Congress party's need for political support in Tamil Nadu, the federal government's geopolitical ambitions in the South Asian region and a conflict with the Sri Lankan government in the 1980s, created a favorable political climate for Tamil separatist organizations (Muni 1993). These opportunity structures meant, first and foremost, that the separatist organizations had readily access to arms, training and other material resources. One respondent observes:

India was the patron. So all the Tamil groups, whether they called themselves Marxists or just Tamil liberation groups, were competing with each other to get

the most favored client status from India. And of course they found patrons within the Indian system, in Tamil Nadu and in the central government.

When the Indian government signed the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord with the Sri Lankan government in 1987, this radically changed the political opportunities of the militant Tamil separatist organizations (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1988). Internal warfare had reduced the number of militant organizations to one: LTTE. The peace accord created a certain degree of regional autonomy with a revitalized Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) controlling the regional council under the auspices of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). LTTE, on the other hand, soon entered into warfare against the IPKF and the EPRLF (Hoole et al. 1992). In this situation new opportunities emerged through clandestine support from the new UNP-government under President Premadasa. The Premadasa-government supported the LTTE with arms and upheld the prospect of a negotiated devolution of power after the departure of the IPKF in order to rally LTTE's support against what they saw as an Indian occupation army. As the actual negotiations after the departure of the IPKF, and another attempt at a negotiated settlement in 1994, failed, the LTTE has been left to rely largely on global networks of Tamils in exile for political and material support.

The combination of network-like mobilizing structures and external political opportunity structures has been a mixed blessing for the militant struggle for Tamil Eelam. The organizational structure of the militant movement is an important explanation for the military success of the separatist organizations, particularly the LTTE (Swamy 1994). However, it also provides an explanation for the fragmentation and internal rivalry within the separatist movement. Various explanations have been put forward for the internal rivalry between different militant organizations in the mid-1980s, including differences in ideology, strategy, and social composition (Hoole et al. 1992). Although none of these factors can be totally dismissed, they are nevertheless partial explanations at most. One factor that is normally ignored but which nevertheless seems important is the availability of resources for the militant organizations through their political opportunity structures. One respondent describes the situation in the mid-1980s in the following way:

Every fellow wanted to become a leader, he wanted to form his own group, he thought that money was coming, that there was recognition. It gave them some social status and it also brought them other benefits. You see, one day you are nobody and the next day you are a leader. That is of course the reason for having so many organizations coming up. You see, you would find 15 only with a so-called socialist ideology. In practice there was little or no difference between the organizations. And later they fought each other, for the same reason also.

The external political opportunity structures have provided the militant movement with an amazing military capacity. Simultaneously, the need for

political legitimacy and accountability among the Tamil population in Sri Lanka has become less important. One respondent describes this situation in the following way:

There was a lot of self-interest built in. We thought about how our organization could dominate this area and that area, how we could become big, the rulers of this Tamil Eelam, rather than the interest of the people. Unfortunately that is the truth. We would talk about the people, but if there was a conflict between the interests of the people and the interests of the organization, we would definitely look into the interests of the organization.

This means that the Tamil civilian population has become trapped between a Sinhalese-dominated state that has constructed them as potential 'terrorists' and a militant movement that has its material basis elsewhere (University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1992).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, it has been argued that studies of nationalist movements should seek inspiration in the contemporary dialog between three perspectives on social movements (theories of new social movements, resource mobilization theories, and theories of collective identity) and a corresponding three-dimensional understanding of place (location, locale, and sense of place). Regarding collective identity and 'sense of place', it has been argued that the Tamil nation and the traditional Tamil homeland should be understood as relatively recent social and regional constructions. Regarding 'location', i.e., the socio-spatial basis of Tamil nationalism, two Tamil nationalisms have been identified. Whereas the parliamentarian Tamil nationalism of the early post-colonial period was an elite-led strategy for political mobilization from 'above' and from the political center, the recent militant Tamil nationalism represents an oppositional movement of marginalized Tamil youth from the political periphery. Regarding resource mobilization and 'locale', it has been argued that these two Tamil nationalisms have been facilitated by time- and place-specific mobilizing structures and political opportunity structures.

The overall conclusion to this discussion is that nationalist mobilization cannot be reduced to essentialist notions of primordial nations, territorial nation-states, or internal colonialism. On the contrary, nationalist mobilization should be understood as the outcome of cultural and political practices by a multitude of actors, operating in time- and place-specific contexts. As demonstrated by the social construction of 'Tamilness' and the changing character of Tamil nationalist politics, questions regarding the characteristics of nations, the relationship between state and nation and the causes of nationalism can only be resolved through contextual analyses. This provides both challenges and opportunities for critical human geography.

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