

# The JVP's campaign among the Tamils, 1977-1982

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## Introduction

During the last four decades Sri Lanka has witnessed three major insurrections mainly by its youth. Since the 1970s, younger generations of Sinhalese and Tamils from similar socio-economic backgrounds have revolted against the erosion of their democratic rights. These insurrections reflected the diverse, but significant and unfulfilled aspirations of the Sinhala and Tamil youth. Both the militant movements in the south including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the militant movements in the north including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been the products of the failures of economic and political development of Sri Lanka (Samaranayake 2008).

The post-colonial Sri Lankan state hardly considered it significant to protect the dignity and security of its socially marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Peaceful demands for social equity, justice, security and dignity were continuously disregarded and/or violently suppressed by the state. Whenever new social groups challenged the authority of state power, the establishment used repressive and violent force. The indignity and insecurity caused by the attacks on the physical and psychological integrity of disadvantaged individuals and communities motivated them to take up arms on behalf of their communities.

Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka have had their own positivist interpretations of their origins. A sizable majority of Sinhalese believe their race is of Aryan stock dating back to the fifth century B.C. Many Sinhalese take an ideological position that combine Sinhaleanness with Buddhism and see themselves as custodians of the land. The Tamils, including Malaiyaha Tamils [1], are of Dravidian origin. Non-Malaiyaha Tamils [2] claim that they were part of the island's original inhabitants, a claim strongly disputed by the Sinhalese. The identity of Malaiyaha Tamils is shaped by their social, economic, political and cultural lives centered primarily on plantations.

The Muslim people (Moors) trace their ancestry to Arab traders who settled in Sri Lanka some time between the eighth and fifteenth centuries. Moors today use Tamil, with words loaned from Arabic, as their primary language. Those in the south also widely use Sinhala. During the colonial period of the Portuguese, when they were persecuted, many of them fled to the Central Highlands. Their cultural identity is strongly defined by Islam, their religion.

The origins of the current conflict in Sri Lanka can be traced back to colonialism. The island's post-colonial political establishment did not arise as a result of a coherent anti-colonial struggle that unified its people. Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus had aspirations to become free from colonialism. In the same process, Tamils had an additional expectation of protecting themselves from majority domination or assimilation. Nevertheless, the neo-colonial establishment carried forward the policies and practices to promote Sinhala majoritarian rule within a unitary constitutional framework.

This situation contributed to the incremental isolation of the communities from interacting with each other, exacerbated by the divisive policies of the elite. Behind this process of isolation one could witness strategies for the further plundering of the island's resources. Also one may witness the continuous march towards authoritarianism, in which people's hopes, aspirations, human rights and civil liberties have been increasingly dashed.

### **Birth of militant movements**

The post-colonial socio-economic and political developments generated new social forces, whose expectations remained unfulfilled. These new social forces adopted radical practices and tendencies against the existing political establishment. In the south, activities of these groups generally materialised in the form of class mobilisations. The attempts in the north and the east, however, took the form of nationalist aspirations. These origins reflect the dual character and outlook of the militant youth movements that later came into being.

The JVP militancy predominantly represented the aspirations of the rural young lower-middle class Sinhala Buddhist constituency (Samaranayake 2008). Similarly the Tamil militancy represented the aspirations of the rural young lower-middle class Tamils from Hindu and Christian religious backgrounds. The state repressed both these movements using brutal force. Both fought back uncompromisingly and at times simultaneously, but independently of each other, against the establishment and the presence of foreign forces. As militancy became manifested in the island, the responses of the state and the militants caused an extension of this radicalisation and alienation within and among the communities.

Malaiyaha youth did not enter the process of militant radicalisation, because of their lack of social and political consciousness. Yet, with increasing awareness among the young generation of Malaiyaha Tamils, the coming decades will become critical: as pointed out by Bass (2001), 'the growing number of over-educated and under-employed Malaiyaha Tamil youths may turn to militant protests and violence, as the JVP and LTTE did before them'.

In the 1980s, some Muslim youth also joined hands with Tamil militants. However, significant differences surfaced between them when Muslims opposed the merger of the North and East under the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord (Guruge 2006). Later on, as the Tamil militancy also turned against the Muslims, some groups allegedly sided with the government, leading to massacres and eviction of Muslims (Ameerdeen 2006). [3]

Lack of appropriate political and economic development and inequitable distribution of economic and social benefits paved the way for the radicalization of the youth. The universal franchise and the lowering of the voting age allowed young people to take part in active electoral politics. Free education was introduced in 1945, and the medium of instruction was changed to local languages, which expanded higher educational opportunities. This was seen as a welcome relief to the rural youth - to their increasing unemployment. However, these opportunities were marred by the disadvantages created by the general lack of university placements and employment opportunities

caused by the discriminative practices of the elite.

This led to extreme discontent amongst the youth, who started questioning the existing socio, political and ideological status quo. Successive post-colonial governments regardless of their political hue, have been ignorant of the underlying socio-political, economic and psychological causes of this militancy. The more repressive the state apparatus became, the more militant the youth became.

Many analysts portray ethnicity as the central theme of the current conflict [4], yet politics is at its root cause. Political leaderships of all ethnicities have opportunistically used ethnicity as a bandwagon to establish, preserve and enhance their political, economic and social power, and to distract people from the domestic policy and program failures, thus building barriers to social and political interaction, and planting mistrust between diverse communities.

### **The social base of the JVP**

The social base of the JVP mainly comprised of rural Sinhala Buddhist youth, semi-proletarian to lower middle class in nature. Prior to the insurrection in 1971, the understanding the political leadership of the JVP had about the problems of the Tamils and other non-Sinhala communities was minimal. Moreover, the attempts of the JVP to carry out political activities among the Tamils were extremely limited.

Many leaders [5] of the JVP including its founder, the late comrade Rohana Wijeweera were originally from the Communist Party of Ceylon – Peking Wing (CPC-P). The leader of CPC-P, the late comrade N Shanmugathan, was a Tamil by ethnicity. By the end of 1964, Rohana became a full-time cadre of the CPC-P, but gradually joined the dissenters within the party, who were dissatisfied with the leadership. He was expelled from the party in late 1966.

Rumours abounded that Rohana had left the CPC-P because its leader was a Tamil. This was not the case.

In 1960s, some on the left took the position that the vanguard of the socialist revolution in Sri Lanka lay with the Malaiyaha Tamils. The JVP disagreed with this position and argued that the international experience has shown that if the leading role of a revolution were based on a minority community, the ruling elite has used racism and communalism to undermine and prevent it from succeeding. In a country where more than 80 percent of the population was rural, more than 90 percent of the country's poor comprised of the rural poor, and urban workers. Therefore the vanguard of the Sri Lankan revolution would be the urban working class allied with the rural peasantry.

Indian Expansionism, one of the controversial political classes of the JVP, touched upon anti-Malaiyaha sentiments, at times, particularly, when Malaiyaha workers were compared with Sinhala chena workers. Malaiyaha workers were also considered allied to India not Sri Lanka.

Most of the Sinhala youth who joined the movement did not have any social linkages to Tamils. The Engineering Faculty of the University of Peradeniya, where the student population was ethnically and culturally more diverse, provided one of the avenues for the JVP to reach towards Tamil students. However, the social aspirations and the needs of many of the students of the Science, Engineering and Medical faculties were different from those of the students of the Arts Faculty.

The leaders of the JVP, who were held behind bars after the 1971 insurrection, made use of the

opportunity to reflect back on their Maoist political roots, and to study the national question in Sri Lanka and the related Marxist policy position. The Tamil youth led peaceful protests against the new Constitution of the island adopted in 1972. The blatant repressive measures adopted by the then government against these youth provided an enlightening environment regarding the issues affecting the Tamils.

The prisons in Hammond Hill, Jaffna, and Kandy where Sinhala and Tamil youth had long been held in detention provided an opportunity for low level exchange of political ideas. Nationalism had started crystallizing in a major way among the Sinhalese in the early fifties and for the Tamils in the early seventies.

The policy declaration of the JVP had been finalised by the early seventies. Its political program recognised the significance of carrying out political activities among the Tamil and Muslim communities, particularly, living in the north, the east, and the central provinces of the island. When the emergency rule was withdrawn in the mid-seventies, the JVP re-commenced its public political activities.

By this time, the JVP had already developed contacts with several Tamil comrades in the north, the east, and the plantations. Some of the JVPers had the opportunity to work in areas where Tamils and Muslims predominated, or in work places where they could develop initial contacts with them in Colombo and elsewhere. Also there were several contacts developed between the JVP and Tamil activists, particularly, comrade Rohana when both groups were detained in the prisons in Jaffna and Hammonds Hill.

The first central committee meeting of the JVP that was held in November 1977 allocated the responsibility and accountability of carrying out political work among the non-Sinhala communities to its politbureau. The first feeble JVP networks among the Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese in the north, in the east and in the plantations were established by the end of 1977 itself. In the north the first political cells were established in Chunnakam and Kilinochchi in the areas where traditional left previously had some hold. Within the next year the network extended to many areas in the north [6] The JVP activities did not progress much in the east, except in the areas where Muslims were predominant [7] In the hill country, the JVP established small groups in Kandy, Matale and Nuwaraeliya districts and there were party cells established in Nuwara-eliya, Talawakele and Hatton. Furthermore, there were strong political alliances established with the plantation workers trade unions [8]

Working among the Tamils and Muslims provided the JVP with the best opportunity to understand the real-life problems and issues the Tamil and Muslim people faced in the island. On the one hand, the ordinary people of these communities had socio-economic and cultural problems very much similar to the problems faced by the majority Sinhalese. On the other hand, because of their linguistic and cultural background and circumstances, they had to face specific problems that the Sinhalese did not have to face.

Most of the resources were spent in certain areas where the social elite were resident, but the ordinary people in the villages were suffering from the worst kind of social and economic issues. These people lacked even the basic day to day needs to survive. They lacked land to work on, water for irrigation, and basic educational and health facilities. The JVP experienced these problems among the people irrespective of whether they were Muslim, Tamil or Sinhala.

The people who spoke only Sinhala or Tamil were treated with repugnance. If people wore their rural attire, sarong or vetti, they were looked down upon. In the south to look for employment, people had to go after politicians to get a 'chit' addressed to a bureaucrat. However, in the north

and parts of the east, the situation was different, because the MPs of these areas were not in the government, thus making the employment opportunities of many educated Tamil youth even more precarious. When Tamil or Muslim people whose mother tongue was Tamil, and who could only communicate in Tamil, corresponded with government departments in Tamil, they received responses in Sinhala only. To find a translator, they had to go to the closest city, adding to their misery and resentment.

Muslim people, especially in villages like Kaththankudy, had to face issues relating to lack of housing facilities, lack of land for paddy cultivation, and finding dowries to give their women folk in marriage. Most of the members of these families lived in small one or two roomed huts they shared for everything. In Colombo, Sinhalese and Muslim families who lived in slums, the situation was just as bad or even worse. Many male members of these families had to sleep in shifts due to lack of room to sleep. Many were compelled to engage in minor criminal activities to eke out a living.

When the JVP approached the Tamil youth in the north [\[9\]](#), already most of them had gravitated towards nationalist political positions. By this time, Tamil youth had commenced associating with diverse Tamil militant groups. Communications between these youth and the JVP, both in public and in private, led to heated debates. It was clear that many young Tamil activists had committed themselves to the nationalist struggle rather than class struggle.

For many of the JVPers from rural Sinhala background who came to the north and east for political activities could not see much difference between the issues facing rural Sinhalese and Tamils. Yet it was difficult for them to identify with the issues the Tamil people were facing due to their cultural and linguistic background. They did not understand the language, tradition, customs and behaviors of the Tamil people. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the life in the north was the feudal remnants in the Tamil society such as caste, religion and social interaction, which was more noticeable than in the south.

Yet the Tamil youth in the north were industrious and productive; parents were keen to educate their children to find good employment that would allow them upward social mobility. Similar to the people in rural Sinhala south, the rural Tamil people in the north and east were hospitable, welcoming and open to communication. However, as time passed, the JVP also felt that there was a change in the political mood among the youth as the armed forces of the state, which were considered alien to Tamils, were present in many locations in the peninsula.

There were a few Tamil JVP activists in Alaveddy, Mallakam, Thirunelvely and Valvetithurai areas. They encountered verbal threats demanding them to stop their political activities. Which organisations carried out such threats against the JVP activities were not clear. This was because there were many militant organisations blooming at the time. In some areas like Velvetithurai and Thirunelvely such threats also emanated from those who supported the CPC-P. In other areas these threats were assumed to be from the militant nationalist groups [\[10\]](#).

For example, two major public events held in Jaffna in the early eighties by the JVP were attacked. A chair was thrown at the stage when 'Songs of Liberation' performance was held at the public auditorium in Jaffna. Again stones were thrown at the public meeting when Rohana was speaking injuring his forehead. Later on, the JVP activists in the north told us that both these incidents were reactions of the Maoist groups to protest against the growing popularity of the JVP in the north and to frighten Tamil people from joining it.

On the other hand, there were pressures building up in the early eighties from two sources within

the JVP. One was from the Tamil comrades based in Kilinochchi and Visvamaduru area who demanded that the JVP should specifically campaign for the rights of Tamil people without mixing up the issue of Tamil rights with the socio-economic issues affecting other people in the island. The JVP rejected this idea as it believed that all these issues arose as a result of the capitalist economic base and the elites' astute policies of divide and rule. While raising the issues affecting all the working people in the island, the JVP also raised the issues that were related to the problems of the Tamil people.

The other pressure point was from comrades of the student wing of the JVP in the university campuses, particularly, some who were at the Katubedde campus. They wanted the JVP to completely drop any public discussions on issues affecting the Tamil people. The JVP rejected this idea also on the grounds similar to the ones raised previously. We also argued that Sinhala people should become aware of the issues the Tamil people in the north and east were facing. As there was a necessity to thrash out this issue in public, and to clarify matters to the cadres, a public lecture was held in the latter part of 1981, at the Sugathadasa Stadium in Colombo.

As one of the instigators of the policy, I addressed a packed crowd at the Sugathadasa Stadium. I clearly explained the JVP policy position that the JVP accepted the right to self-determination of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. However, the JVP did not advocate separation as a solution to their problems; rather it advocated a united Sri Lanka with regional autonomy, where all residents could live as equals. At the questions and answers session, I had to respond to many questions. [11] During the presidential election campaign, the JVP was able to hold successful public rallies in many places in the north and east. Yet, the number of people who voted for the JVP in the north and east were small, but not disappointing. Many JVP leaders, who had higher expectations, were not happy with the island wide election outcome and the number of votes the party received in the north and east. This poor election showing was interpreted to state that the Sinhala electorate did not like the JVP advocating the right to self-determination of Tamils. While this may have had some impact, it was not the major factor that led to this situation. In the Presidential election of 1982, the majority of the people were aware that only a candidate of the UNP or the SLFP would win. So, most of the sympathisers of other parties also became polarised between the UNP and the SLFP.

The JVP as a whole represented Marxist and Sinhala nationalist tendencies. The nationalistic element rested with the historic glorification of the past Sinhala Kingdoms. The current JVP has shed all its Marxist tendencies and become purely nationalistic. It wants to achieve a unitary Sinhala state by defending their 'motherland'. Thus the Sinhala Buddhist cultural identity can be made to flourish while western cultural decadence and the influences of other cultures on Sinhalese could be negated. Their so-called idea of socialism has been subsumed by its commitment to safeguard this unitary state, which is ironically a colonial construct.

## Conclusion

Between 1977 and 1982, the JVP made a genuine attempt to forge links between the Sinhala and Tamil youth. This was not successful due to the different historical and nationalist trajectories of these groups, their social base, and some of the opportunistic policies that the JVP espoused, particularly since late 1982. Both the Sinhala and Tamil youth movements expressed their dissatisfaction with the state and their desire for change through political violence. Both the JVP and the LTTE adhered to a mixed ideology of socialism and nationalism. The state was their common enemy; however, succumbing to their nationalistic politics of the glories of their respective feudal past, they saw each other as enemies not allies.

The JVP was able to successfully mobilize the southern youth, but it was adventurist and committed



strategic and tactical errors. After the failed 1971 insurrection, the leadership of the JVP made use of the opportunity to reflect on its political theory and practice.

Implementation of the new constitution for Sri Lanka in 1972 and the protests of Tamil youth against it also informed these reflections. After the release of its leaders in 1977, the JVP decided to pursue political activities among all communities in the island.

In the seventies and early eighties, the JVP was supportive of the right to self determination of Tamil people, and recognised Sinhala, Tamil and English as national languages of the land. The political interaction of the JVP occurred when many Tamil youth were hardening their nationalist positions because of the repressive policies of the state. Despite threats from some Tamil militants, the JVP persisted in its political activities in the North and the East until 1982. However, the poor showing of the JVP in the Presidential elections of 1982 led to a revision: some ideologues claimed that the party's advocacy of the Tamil people's right to self determination was one reason for this failure.

From that moment, the JVP moved from a socialist party to a chauvinistic one. The political opportunism of its leadership was a critical factor in this shift. They revived the slogan "Indian expansionism" which had featured in the JVP program before 1972. The JVP's social base mainly comprised of rural, semi- proletarian and petit bourgeois Buddhist Sinhala youth; The neo-colonial political and economic developments in the country were not conducive to building interaction between the Sinhala and Tamil youth; and the interaction of most of the JVP's membership with Tamils was minimal, so that empathy towards the issues facing the Tamil people was also minimal.

Nevertheless, the muted examples of political dialogue during the late '70s and early '80s indicate that dialogue is feasible among restive political elements on opposite sides of the fence. In the present situation such dialogue has become essential to ensure that the aspirations of the marginalised are fulfilled. However, this requires a paradigm shift in the attitudes and thinking of all the people residing in the island as well as the Sinhala and Tamil expatriate communities. The Diaspora now has the opportunity to become active drivers of this paradigm shift by changing their role as advocates of political violence to one of constructively creating this reality through their interactions with each other.

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## P.S.

*Lionel Bopage was a former General Secretary of the JVP and was involved with the party since 1968 until his resignation in 1984. For more content with Bopage on Groundviews, click here.*

From Groundviews

[http://www.groundviews.org/2009/12/17/feature-article-the-jvp%E2%80%99s-campaign-among-the-tamils-1977-1982/#\\_ftn11](http://www.groundviews.org/2009/12/17/feature-article-the-jvp%E2%80%99s-campaign-among-the-tamils-1977-1982/#_ftn11)

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## Footnotes

[1] The so-called Indian or Estate Tamils, workers of Indian origin speaking Tamil who were brought by the British to work in their plantations in 1840s.

[2] The so-called Jaffna or Ceylon Tamils

[3] Muslims saw the percentage of Muslim population would drop after the merger from nearly 35 per cent in the East to about 17 per cent in a combined North and East.

[4] Ethnic conflict may occur between aggregations of people that share a collective view of themselves as being distinctively different from other aggregations of people because of their shared inherent characteristics such as their race, religion, language, cultural heritage, clan, or tribal affiliation.

[5] Included Sanath Boralukatiya, S V A Piyatilaka, W T Karunaratne, H B Premapala and D P Wimalagune, Wattala Milton, W D N Jayasinghe (Loku Athula) and others.

[6] Among these areas were KKS, Tellippalai, Udippiddi, Nellaidi, Chavakachcheri, Point Pedro, Manippai, Mulliawalai, Visvamadu, Iranamadu, Paranthan, Pungudutheevu, Nainatheevu, Eluvatheevu, Velanai, Karaveddi and Mallakam..

[7] In Trincomalee, Ampara, Kalawanchikudi, and Batticaloa also there were small groups of Tamils and Muslims supporting the JVP

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[8] Particularly, of comrade Illancheliyan and Kandurata Tharuna Peramuna (Up-country Youth Front) led by comrade V L Pereira

[9] Many private and public discussions and talks, classes, and rallies were held at houses, libraries, or parks.

[10] For example, in the early eighties when a Tamil comrade called Navaratnam was threatened by a militant organization, and the house of one of his relations was occupied by the militants, the JVP took measures to bring this comrade down to Colombo to stay in the party office for a while.



[11] One of the persistent questioners was the current Dr Dayan Jayatilleke, His Excellency the Ambassador of the Government of Sri Lanka in Geneva. He was then a simple “comrade Dayan Jayatilleke”. I still remember his main line of questioning because, even after the public lecture, he accompanied me up to the then head office of the JVP at Armour Street, consistently arguing that the JVP should recognise Eelam as the only solution to the problems the Tamil people were faced with. Later on he joined the EPRLF (one of the Tamil militant organisations) and became one of the ministers of the Eastern Provincial Council, the Chief Minister of which declared Eelam, when the Indian Peace Keeping Forces were present in the island. By and large I continue to hold the same political views I had during those days regarding the national question, but I cannot say the same about Dr Jayatilleke.