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# MEMORIES OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA AMONG IMMIGRANT TAMILS IN THE UK

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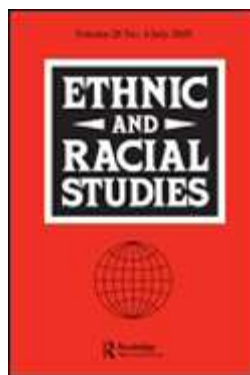
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**MEMORIES OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA AMONG  
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## MEMORIES OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA AMONG IMMIGRANT TAMILS IN THE UK

### Abstract

This article contributes to recent studies on the relationship between ethnicity and memory in the formation of transnational communities. The focus of the article is migrant Tamils' memories of violence in Sri Lanka in 1958, in the aftermath of an act declaring Sinhala to be the sole language of administration in the country. The ways in which past violence is remembered by this overlooked older generation helps in understanding the particular impetus of the contemporary Tamil diaspora, which continues to play a key role in shaping the image of Sri Lanka abroad. Research on the formation of the diaspora must therefore be situated within a more concrete history of relations between Sinhalese and Tamils in post-independence Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka; Tamil; identity; memory; violence; diaspora.

### Introduction

A recent editorial in the *Tamil Guardian* newspaper described the Tamils of Sri Lankan origin living outside of the country as constituting a diaspora (Tamil Guardian 2010). (1) This 'transnational community', which was 'a direct produce of Sinhala oppression', had during the 1960s and 1970s 'near-universally' supported the Tamil

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2  
3 Federal Party (FP) and its successor the Tamil United Front (TUF). As a way of  
4 relating the non-violent methods of protest practised by the earlier generation to the  
5 more forceful later demands for an autonomous Tamil state, the editorial emphasized  
6 the word 'liberation' in the 1976 renaming of the TUF (to become the Tamil United  
7 Liberation Front, TULF). In the context of a contemporary political landscape in  
8 which the Sri Lankan government had decisively defeated the Tamil Tigers (LTTE),  
9 the writer of the editorial was perhaps also trying to redeem former parliamentary  
10 methods in winning political rights and representation for the Tamils in Sri Lanka. By  
11 contrast, a Tamil political activist who had left Ceylon for the UK after the riots of  
12 1958 mocked the same insertion of the word 'liberation' in the re-naming of the TUF.  
13 For him, writing at the beginning of the LTTE's war with the Sri Lankan government  
14 in the 1980s, the act was a cynical ploy of the older Tamil politicians to get on terms  
15 with the increasingly militant Tamil youth (Sivanandan 1984, p. 24). While for the  
16 editor of the *Tamil Guardian* the memory of the word's addition signified  
17 reconciliation between the past and the present, for the old Tamil activist it instead  
18 recalled aversion for an era of shameful concession and compromise (Thiruchelvam  
19 1984, p. 197-9). Exploring the relationship between these contrasting interpretations  
20 of a historical event provides a way of understanding generational memory among Sri  
21 Lankan Tamils, which is the theme of this essay.

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In recent years, the influence and demands of Tamils living overseas has become a focus of research (Sriskandarajah 2005). In order to find out what this group wants, however, it is important to understand its self-perception by studying Tamils' thinking about themselves in relation to nationalism. Present day hopes and fears are often rooted in unresolved attitudes toward one's collective history (Mack 1983). For example, the oft-noted Tamil sense of victimhood, giving rise to a 'politics of loss and

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3 guilt', contains the hallmarks of a mythic comprehension of the past (Spencer 2000, p.  
4 135; Daniel 1996, p. 26). While such interpretations provide useful insights into the  
5 psychology of migrant or diaspora Tamils, they can be considerably enriched by  
6 paying attention to the contribution of specific events in the formation and revision of  
7 these views (Nagata 1998, pp. 433-4; Rosenthal 1989). The present essay seeks to  
8 admit recent Sri Lankan history into this analytical framework to show how  
9 individuals can either acquiesce in or resist national and collective memories.  
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20 The context of this essay is London Tamil migrants' experiences of and  
21 responses to the violence they witnessed in Ceylon between 22 May and 3 June 1958.  
22 The violence, which has been remembered as both a communal riot and as a pogrom,  
23 involved the killing of hundreds of Tamils by Sinhalese, and further injury, arson,  
24 looting and destruction of Tamil property, as well as largely retaliatory violence by  
25 Tamils resulting in the killing of many Sinhalese and the displacement of thousands  
26 more (Vittachi 1958; Manor 1989; Sivanandan 1984). The violence has been  
27 attributed to different factors. On the one hand, the Ceylon government was criticized  
28 for its inability to handle the pressure of a growing national polity, and  
29 misjudgements by senior political figures were held to have spoiled the genuine  
30 opportunities for compromise between Sinhalese and Tamils over the issue of the  
31 official use of their respective languages. In addition to short-term political causes,  
32 some also pointed to the general climate of economic insecurity in post-independence  
33 Ceylon, the prevalent state of lawlessness in the country during the late 1950s, and  
34 even the policy of clearing northern jungles that was held to have reawakened a  
35 centuries-old territorial conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese (Vittachi 1958;  
36 Wriggins 1959).  
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While the causes have been debated over time, the sense of defeat and humiliation felt by many Tamils in the aftermath of the riots is a common aspect of minority myths and also in some ways resembles the emotional state of many Tamils living overseas today (Samuel and Thompson 1990, p. 19; Sivanandan 2010, p. 59; Jayawickreme 2010). Both groups feel victimized, deprived of justice, discriminated against, and in need of redress. Whereas events in Sri Lanka especially since the state-led violence of 1983 have been well documented, however, the 1958 riots are under-explored despite their broad impact on a generation of Ceylon Tamils (Jeganathan 1998). Indeed, '1958' has neither been addressed in detail by academic research nor memorialized in the popular consciousness as July 1983 has. Such circumstances lead to problems in remembrance when this is necessary for the healing of wounds (Kirmayer 1996). Not only has the violence of 1958 been under-researched, furthermore, but there are also significant gaps in historical knowledge about Tamil migrants from this earlier generation. The focus of this paper will be to study the ways in which ideas of belonging to a nation or ethnic group are affected by experiences of traumatic violence and their remembrance within specific social and historical contexts (Hunt and McHale 2008).

The present essay will first look at conventional interpretations of the violence of 1958 and then consider accounts of the same given by interviewees and also by other Tamils who have written about the subject. The oral testimonies of Tamils who arrived to the UK to study, work, or simply to get away from Ceylon in the late-1950s and 1960s will therefore be read in parallel with published accounts by Sri Lankan Tamil émigrés from the same generation. Besides cross-checking the sources against each other, histories of the period will also be used to corroborate them where possible. The use of oral testimony in studies of Sri Lankan Tamils living overseas

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3 has been largely positivistic and concerned with establishing details of fact. While  
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5 there are obviously sound reasons for this approach, it often fails to grasp the practical  
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7 world-view of participants and the particular meaning that they attribute to the facts  
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9 they convey. Where research has been concerned with subjectivity and bias in the  
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11 reporting of events, the psychology of the witness and the uneven role of memory  
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13 have themselves hardly been taken into consideration (an exception is Kanapathipillai  
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15 1992). The importance of attending to subjectivity is in its location of the culturally-  
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17 specific forms through which individuals express themselves historically (Portelli  
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19 1991, pp. 1-26).  
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25 Interviews were conducted with seven Tamil men in their homes in suburban  
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27 London between 2002 and 2004. Male accounts should not of course be normalized,  
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29 and this sample reflects the views of those then available for interview, that had lived  
30  
31 in Ceylon through the riots of 1958 and subsequently, within the following decade,  
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33 moved to London. Almost all of the interviewees were therefore over sixty and most  
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35 were in their seventies. These men may be characterized as belonging within the first  
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37 and second 'Phases' of Tamil immigrants to London, although, as will be seen from  
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39 their accounts, it is difficult to maintain these categories given both the constructed  
40  
41 nature of memories and also their mutability (Portelli 1991; Daniel and Thangaraj  
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43 1995; McDowell 1996). Although it is a small sample, its paucity reflects the  
44  
45 relatively small number of Tamils living in London during the early 1960s, probably  
46  
47 no more than a few thousand compared with today's estimated population of 180,000  
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49 (Siddhisena and White 1999, p. 516; Spence 2008, International Crisis Group 2010).  
50  
51 London is a suitable place to conduct this study because the majority of the Sri  
52  
53 Lankan Tamil migrants to the UK from the late 1950s and 1960s settled in the city  
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55 and continue to live in its suburbs today (Siddhisena and White 1999, pp. 520-3).  
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The oral historical method for obtaining this data aims to show the advantages of validity over reliability in helping to reveal what has been described elsewhere as the ‘interpretative power’ of the individual account (Grele 1985, pp. 45-6; Thompson 2000, p. 151). The names of the interviewees have been altered in accordance with the wishes of the majority. While they are no longer in the mainstream of London Tamil social life, many remained active either as political campaigners or as organisers of Tamil cultural and religious practices. The perspective of this generation is important, since one of the principal markers of difference and understanding within a migrant community is generational (Nora 1989, p.19; Thomson 1999, pp. 31-2). An ageing population also provides us with an opportunity to look at a group which, because of changing social discourses, will also have changed their individual narratives of the past many times (Schuman and Scott 1989; Hunt and McHale 2008, p. 51).

### **Interpretations of violence**

One of the leading historians of post-independence Sri Lanka summarized the tumultuous events that took place in Ceylon from the elections of 1956 to the end of the 1958 riots by claiming that although the overall death toll from the riots was relatively small ‘by South Asian standards’, ‘the shock felt by the Sri Lankan polity was very great’, since it brought to an end ‘over four decades of orderly, if unexciting, political evolution’. Furthermore, ‘there was also a recognition that this violent encounter between the Sinhalese and Tamils, the first in Sri Lanka’s modern history, was an avoidable, self-inflicted wound’ (de Silva 1998, pp. 121-2). Other commentators writing at the time hoped that the riots would shock political leaders to

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2  
3 their senses so that they would begin to live up to the responsibilities of governing a  
4 mass polity in the wake of the British exit in 1948 (Wriggins 1959, pp. 38-9). All of  
5 the contemporary accounts observed the riots as a challenge to Ceylon's political  
6 modernity (Jeganathan 1998). British newspapers commented on the breakdown of  
7 the government and expressed admiration at the 'detachment' and calm of the  
8 Governor-General, appointed by the Queen, who took control of the country for a  
9 period after a state of emergency was declared by the Prime Minister on 27 May,  
10 restoring it to order (Wilson 1959, p. 165).

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22 In the aftermath of the riots, many Tamils felt subordinated by the majority  
23 Sinhalese, who to their minds were being solely represented by the government. With  
24 the change of government in 1956 to the more populist Sri Lanka Freedom Party  
25 (SLFP) upon their promise to make Sinhala the sole official language of the country  
26 there was a concurrent drop in Tamil entry to public sector jobs in Colombo, on which  
27 many aspiring Tamils from the north had relied since colonial times. Tamils also felt  
28 aggrieved at the government policy of reclaiming land for agricultural development in  
29 the Tamil concentrated north and east provinces and bringing in Sinhalese settlers.  
30 Although favourable impressions of the armed forces were in some ways strengthened  
31 by their effectiveness and impartiality during the riots, Tamils in many areas also  
32 noted delays and hesitation by the police to help them. The most assured  
33 interpretations of 1958 were those provided by Tamils in favour of separating the two  
34 linguistic groups, who observed that the riots would not have happened had the island  
35 been divided 'into two ethno-linguistic areas', since 'the safest and most peaceful  
36 areas were those with unmixed populations' (Arasaratnam, pp. 509-510).

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58 The interviewees' and other Tamil writers' accounts that follow are sometimes  
59 developments of these well-known interpretations and at other times quite personal  
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3 and distinctive reflections on the violence they witnessed or encountered. While there  
4 are undoubtedly large areas of fact in the accounts, the analysis adheres to the  
5 principle that the value of a fact can only be understood from the meaning imputed to  
6 it by the narrator. Several broad sets of responses were conceived within the  
7 individual memories of violence, and the accounts will be described according to  
8 these responses.  
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### 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 *Anti-Tamil discrimination*

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24 One series of reflections on violence consisted of expressions of the unjust treatment  
25 meted out to Tamils at the hands of the Sinhalese. For example, Nathan remembered  
26 that  
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34 Before '58, there were certain Sinhalese districts [where we were  
35 welcome]...labourers were Sinhalese...we didn't have any problems...The  
36 root of the problems was the language policy, that changed overnight with the  
37 Sinhalese. Then of course every peon, everybody said "now we are the  
38 masters." They started talking Sinhalese and everything and we are out  
39 [laughs].  
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51 Rasan remembered it with a different perspective, however, stating that  
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55 Acquiring knowledge of Sinhalese was a very practical thing. If you had to  
56 deal as a doctor working in a Sinhalese area, you would be foolish not to know  
57 Sinhalese, because you can't do your job. [The problem was when the  
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3 acquisition of the Sinhalese language] was becoming conditional to your  
4 advancement in your career.  
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10 The number of Tamils in professional jobs in Ceylon fell during the 1960s as the  
11 number of Tamils departing to the UK for higher education correspondingly rose  
12 (Taylor 1994, pp. 91-92). According to the historian K M de Silva, the popular  
13 campaign for the more prominent use of Sinhala lost enthusiasm after the desired  
14 legislation was brought into effect in the mid-1950s (de Silva 1998, p. 42). Yet the  
15 memory of the change remained sharp among educated Tamils of that era and was felt  
16 more broadly across society than within the political classes alone. Rasan indicated  
17 one reason why this may have been so, referring to the Official Language Act of  
18 1956:  
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34 What happened in 1956 was suddenly what was in fact happening in day-to-  
35 day life, somebody was trying to make it a law, you see. That is where it  
36 became irksome. There was somebody, sort of saying “from now on,  
37 Sinhalese is the official language.” There I think it is more pride than anything  
38 else that Tamils decided that this is, sort of, to some extent marginalized them.  
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48 It wasn't the dawning necessity of linguistic change that repelled many Tamils, but  
49 the fact that it was made legislative and thus a command to be obeyed. Another Tamil  
50 from this generation, the anthropologist Stanley Jeyarajah Tambiah, observed that the  
51 upper class Tamils of Jaffna staked their reputation of being a tight-knit minority, at  
52 least in the eyes of the Sinhalese, on their pride and the 'experience of social  
53 dominance in their own region' (Tambiah 1986, p. 106).  
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3 Many Tamils sought in response to fight against perceived discrimination.  
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5 Appu, who worked for the Ceylon railway company in 1958, spoke of how he  
6  
7 opposed unequal legislation 'on a political basis' through membership in a trade union.  
8  
9 'When they passed [the Official Languages Act] I refused to accept it, I refused to  
10  
11 learn Sinhalese'. After he settled in London from 1962, Appu established Tamil  
12  
13 political and cultural societies, claiming that 'whatever we did, we sent it to Colombo,  
14  
15 all our organization, so that it can spread there. And also [we kept] in touch with the  
16  
17 important people'. Tambiah noted that those Tamils 'forced abroad' remembered  
18  
19 'their homeland' through the formation of overseas associations, the collection and  
20  
21 distribution of information, and the airing of grievances to host governments  
22  
23 (Tambiah 1986, p. 112). The expression of a common grievance and the sense of  
24  
25 being unjustly treated at the hands of the Sinhalese unified many Tamils who went  
26  
27 overseas and helped them to define their goals, providing them with a sense of  
28  
29 belonging to a wider collective that maintained links with the 'homeland'. The  
30  
31 existential nature of this act lies in the identification with a global Tamil nation and its  
32  
33 humiliations, which provides a vehicle and justification through which passivity may  
34  
35 be converted into self-assertion and even aggression. Personal and collective wounds  
36  
37 can be healed and injustice addressed (Mack 1983, p. 68).  
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46 A further aspect of this response to violence in collective social action is in  
47  
48 fighting against discrimination elsewhere. Ambalavanar Sivanandan, the former  
49  
50 director of the Institute of Race Relations in London, left Ceylon with his family after  
51  
52 1958. In a published interview he stated that under his leadership 'The Institute  
53  
54 became far more than a professional organization or a research body; it was rather a  
55  
56 servicer of movements.' He claimed to be at home in his struggle, which was not just  
57  
58 for Tamils, but also for 'blacks' and 'Third world' peoples (Sivanandan 1990, pp. 7,  
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3 16). Appu showed a similarly broad outlook in his desire to seek justice by coming to  
4  
5 the UK to better understand the roots of the Tamil 'genocide' in the land of the  
6  
7 'elusive oppressor'. Quickly brushing aside a question about his children, he  
8  
9 explained that  
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15 The primary motive for me [in coming to Britain] was to tell the world: if we  
16  
17 don't do that then we would have been kept completely covered from  
18  
19 international attention...I thought that it was the British who put us at the  
20  
21 mercy of a majority; they were not bothered about the Tamils, they had their  
22  
23 own agenda.  
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30 Wanting to get to the heart of the interview, as he saw it, he explained how the British  
31  
32 needed to be informed about the Sinhalese, who were 'doing what they normally do,  
33  
34 kill.' He drew a distinction between himself and other Tamil migrants of that period,  
35  
36 who were simply in the UK to make a living. His own perception of events was  
37  
38 sharper, as he explained: 'In 1958, [Tamil] people did not feel that they are displaced.  
39  
40 Only intellectually they must have felt [this way]. I felt very strongly...What I thought  
41  
42 was, "Get out. Don't be a fool. This is not the place to fight."' His visceral  
43  
44 understanding of the violence led him to what he believed was a more radical  
45  
46 response than that of his fellow Tamils in Ceylon: to leave the country rather than to  
47  
48 stay and oppose discrimination there. During the course of the interview, his view of  
49  
50 Sinhalese people became softer, but his determination 'to fight oppression' from the  
51  
52 UK hardened. He also explained that he 'learned the English grammar and the reading  
53  
54 more powerfully than the others, because I wanted to polish the language. I thought:  
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56 "this is a weapon."' Acquiring a better grasp of English, the language most affected in  
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3 practice by the 1956 legislation, would better equip him to respond to the violence he  
4 had suffered. This displacement of the rhetoric of war to a different sphere denotes a  
5 certain acceptance of oppression, even in its defiance (Samuel and Thompson 1990, p.  
6 19).  
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### 13 14 15 *Feelings of rejection* 16

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19 The individual accounts all testify to the general sense of loss felt by Tamils after  
20 1958, which finds its mirror image in the Sinhala cry of '*ahey anduwa*': 'the  
21 government is ours' (Manor 1989, pp. 287-292). In the mythical memory of events  
22 there is an almost magical feeling attached to the authority of the State, so that Tamils  
23 hearing '*ahey anduwa*' on the streets of Colombo and in other parts of Ceylon must  
24 have felt as if the keys to the castle were being jangled in front of a beaten enemy.  
25 Appu remembered 'extremists and Bhikkhus' (ordained Buddhist monks) making  
26 Sinhalese youths  
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41 dress up as [the ancient Sinhala King] Dutthagamani's soldiers' and parading  
42 up and down the road. When they saw this, 'The middle class Sinhalese  
43 laughed, they were happy. So when '58 came, I didn't see any educated  
44 Sinhalese raise their voice against what happened in those days.  
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53 The story of the ancient King Dutthagamani had begun to appear in nationalist Tamil  
54 histories of the 1920s and 1930s to serve as an example of Sinhalese duplicity and  
55 could have been associated in this way by the narrator (Hellman-Rajanayagam 1996).  
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3 Certainly, Appu connected the events of 1958 with the growth of tolerance for more  
4 aggressive displays of ethnic assertion.  
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8 While some of the interviewees remembered the passivity of the educated,  
9 others told of their experience of state indifference. Ambalavanar Sivanandan was  
10 particularly upset with Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike's radio broadcast after  
11 the first few days of violence.  
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20 When the Prime Minister came on the radio – four days after the 'riots' began  
21 – ostensibly to heal the communal breach, he pointed to the unexplained death  
22 of a Sinhala businessman and ex-mayor (of Nuwara Eliya) in the Tamil  
23 District of Batticaloa on 25 May as the cause of 'the various acts of violence  
24 and lawlessness' that had begun three days earlier! The death of one Sinhalese  
25 man seemed to weigh more heavily on the Prime Minister's conscience than  
26 the hundreds of Tamils burnt, mutilated, raped and hacked to death  
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(Sivanandan 1990, p. 220).

Although the pattern of anti-Tamil violence had already been established by the time  
of the broadcast, Bandaranaike's words were registered with confusion and even  
anger by Tamils waiting around their radio sets at home in 1958 for a reassuring word  
from the Prime Minister. The absence of an official inquiry following the riots added  
to the sense of a permanent breach having developed between Tamils and the state (de  
Silva 1998, p. 123).

Interestingly, Rasan recalled the violence of 1958 through the radio broadcast  
itself:

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3 1958 was, if I can remember the sequence of events, one man was killed in  
4  
5 Kalkuda, a Sinhalese man was killed by a Tamil man, and that was clearly a  
6  
7 domestic thing. And Bandaranaike came on the radio and actually mentioned  
8  
9 the fact that a Sinhalese man was killed by a Tamil man and then straight to  
10  
11 the next village and so on and then of course, everybody in Colombo.  
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18 By shifting the origin of the violence to a later point in time in which there is a  
19  
20 concrete object of blame (the Prime Minister's radio broadcast), memory makes a  
21  
22 healing intervention. Rasan is then able to hang the outbreak of the riots entirely upon  
23  
24 the authority and misjudgement of the Prime Minister, who takes the form of the  
25  
26 idealistic politician incapable of dealing with the realities of governing the newly  
27  
28 enfranchised masses. By contrast, the armed forces, which Rasan admiringly noted  
29  
30 contained 'British trained officers', 'were there in full multitude [during the riots] and  
31  
32 it was brought under control irrespective of what the ministers were saying at the  
33  
34 time'.  
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39 Rasan expressed regret that Bandaranaike's 'stature as a leader' was  
40  
41 diminished by the riots, since he was 'one of the most intelligent politicians Sri Lanka  
42  
43 ever had, and in another time under different circumstances he might have been a  
44  
45 more outstanding prime minister'. The politically moderate Tamils of this generation  
46  
47 viewed the events of the 1950s within the context of later hopelessness and despair,  
48  
49 particularly in light of state collusion in the devastating riots of 1983 (DeVotta 2000,  
50  
51 pp. 64-5). The 1958 riots then became for this group of Tamils a sign of the failure of  
52  
53 Ceylon's political leadership amid the self-evident hostility of Sinhalese chauvinists.  
54  
55 The leaders' missed opportunity to intervene and to avert the course of violence in  
56  
57 1958 was at the same time an important contributing factor towards subsequent ethnic  
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3 polarization. For Rasan, this is expressed through regret for the fortunes of  
4  
5 Bandaranaike, who was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 1959. Nathan reflected  
6  
7 that a more gradually effected change in the language of the country would have  
8  
9 created fewer problems, but, he said, 'it was the politicians, you see, not only the  
10  
11 people who turned.' Tambiah also regretted the 'lack of generosity' among the  
12  
13 Sinhalese Buddhist activists that had mobilized the masses during the 1950s, whose  
14  
15 positive influence could have averted much damage and loss (Tambiah 1986, p. 72).  
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20 While some Tamils achieved a kind of symbolic closure through the  
21  
22 substitution of memory, Sivanandan's unmitigated grief at the turn of events in 1958  
23  
24 could rely on no such possibility. In his novel of Twentieth Century Sri Lanka,  
25  
26 intriguingly titled *When Memory Dies*, Sivanandan's Tamil narrator describes the  
27  
28 sense of utter confusion and incomprehension at the events that were unfolding in  
29  
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31 1958:  
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36 None of this could be happening, I said to myself from time to time, closing  
37  
38 my eyes. It had never happened before, not in 2,000 years of history, not like  
39  
40 this; the Sinhalese were my friends, I had married one, my son was a  
41  
42 Sinhalese; none of this could be happening (Sivanandan 1998, p. 228).  
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48 Sivanandan's narrator gives voice to the confusion felt by the author himself, whose  
49  
50 incomprehension grows out of a distressing experience with the state in which basic  
51  
52 questions about the causes of violence and the future of the Tamil people in Ceylon  
53  
54 are left unanswered (Hamber and Wilson 2003, p. 150). The perception of the  
55  
56 collapse of the state, formerly on 'our' side, into a condition of unreason, creates  
57  
58 radical doubt in the author (Portelli 1990).  
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The perception of Sri Lanka as a failed democracy also finds roots in the disorder of 1958. Rasan offered an almost apologetic appraisal: 'My memories of the '58 riots were, I think, to some extent, in my view, a sort of unfortunate sequence of events over which the government lost control altogether.' He didn't detect a pattern in the separate events that he either witnessed or heard about, except in the government's inability to cope with them. Anthony Jeyaratnam Wilson, the Tamil political scientist who emigrated from Ceylon some time after the riots, wrote in 1959 of 'a general breakdown in the normal machinery of law and order throughout various parts of the country' in the days preceding the declaration of the State of Emergency (Wilson 1959, p.160). Tambiah described the movement of workers and professionals from Sri Lanka 'to all parts of the globe' as 'symptoms of the island's deeper malaise: a small island of many people whose political machinery is running down in an environment of increasing fragmentation and factionalism.' He claimed some measure of redress by turning the sequence of political failure on its head to acknowledge Tamil expatriates for their role in the 'erosion of the credibility of Sri Lanka as a democratic polity' (Tambiah 1986, pp. 2-3, 112).

#### *Shock of first encounter*

The forms of explanation that support the gradual erasure from memory of the events of 1958 are often in tension with the lasting immediacy of witnessed violence and disruption. Rasan's first experience of the effects of the riot were when he went by bus

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3 ...as I normally do to teach at Royal [College, Colombo]. I got off the bus stop  
4  
5 and suddenly realized there was something going on and found that all the  
6  
7 refugees had been brought into Royal and that it was a refugee camp.  
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12 A sudden shock, a jolt to his everyday experience, initially alerted him to a bigger  
13  
14 change that was gradually unfolding. The association of the memory of physical  
15  
16 violence with somebody familiar to the witness is common. Rasan also remembered  
17  
18 the death of his principal at Royal College, 'a Sinhalese man', during the riots, when  
19  
20 'driving through the streets of Colombo somebody threw a stone at the car and he lost  
21  
22 his life.' Sivanandan described how 'my parents' house was attacked by a Sinhalese  
23  
24 mob, my nephew had petrol thrown on him and burnt alive, and friends and relatives  
25  
26 disappeared into refugee camps' (Sivanandan 2000, p. 59). On another occasion he  
27  
28 explained how 'his father's house was attacked and I had to go disguised as a cop  
29  
30 with an empty rifle in my hand to get my parents away from a screaming mob'  
31  
32 (Sivanandan 1990, p. 9). Appu also shared a personal memory: 'In the '58 riots, [my  
33  
34 daughter was shocked] and she became deaf'. In a reassuring voice he added: 'I  
35  
36 brought her here. She lives on her own, very independent and very helpful to me'.  
37  
38 These examples also show how narrators sometimes assume control of their memories,  
39  
40 either by claiming to have taken direct action ('I had to go disguised as a cop') or by  
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42 claiming immediate understanding of what was going on at the time ('I brought her  
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44 here').  
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53 Some Tamils experienced not only physical violence but also ethnic separation  
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55 and categorization as distinct from the Sinhalese majority. Nathan described how  
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3 In 1958, during the riots...the Catholic Sinhalese, the particular day I was to  
4 meet them I was...when I went to meet them my big brother told me “you  
5 can’t go on any further, they are beating, you know.” See there’s a connection  
6 between Matale and Kantale: Matale is a Sinhalese district; Kantale is more or  
7 less Tamil and Sinhalese. They were stopping all the buses coming in to  
8 Kantale and then beating them... [My two colleagues] were asked to recite a  
9 Kavi in Sinhalese – like our Thevaram in Tamil – they couldn’t, they were  
10 Catholic. They were burnt alive! These Sinhalese colleagues of mine. I heard  
11 only when I returned back home, three, four days after that, although Kantale  
12 police station was inspected by an inspector...Sanders, his name is Sanders  
13 but he’s a Tamil chap, and he advised us quietly to get away. All Tamils from  
14 the department came to Trincomalee and by boat to Jaffna. That was the ’58  
15 famous riots.  
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36 Nathan did not witness these events himself but nevertheless remembered them  
37 clearly and in a form that distinguished the safety of Matale (a Sinhalese district) from  
38 the danger of Kantale (containing a mixed population). Indeed, the story is filled with  
39 markers of ethnic identification: Catholic Sinhalese, asked to recite a Buddhist prayer,  
40 burned alive, Tamils advised to leave for the north, by a Tamil inspector named  
41 Sanders (see also Vittachi 1958, p. 49; Sivanandan 1984, p. 14; Tambiah 1992, pp.  
42 59-60).  
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53 The cultural particularity of ethnic violence has been noted by other writers.  
54 For example, Vittachi writing of the violence in Colombo described how Tamils were  
55 singled out by their attackers by their wearing shirts over their vertis, having earring  
56 holes in their ears (from parents’ studding them during infancy), and having to read  
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3 and explain a piece from a Sinhalese newspaper (Vittachi 1958, p. 54). Appu  
4 compared the beating of some Tamil politicians outside parliament in 1956 with the  
5 treatment of African-Americans by whites in the pre-Civil Rights era: it was ‘not only  
6 discrimination, [but they were] completely ridiculed.’ Nathan remembers in 1958  
7  
8 ‘Sinhalese trying to hit the Tamils anywhere they find [them]...for me there was no  
9 reason at all’. Sivanandan ‘saw people being killed just by virtue of the fact that they  
10 were Tamil; people being burnt alive’ (Sivanandan 1990, p.9). The memories indicate  
11 that Tamils were not only attacked but also humiliated, as if put in their place by their  
12 attackers. In this way, the riots could be said to have helped establish value norms and  
13 certainties amid the social and economic insecurities of post-independence Ceylon  
14 (Appadurai 1998).

15  
16 Appu remembered in Colombo during the riots how ‘I was going in the  
17 bus...the ordinary fisherwomen and the market women, they thought that I am a  
18 Sinhalese...they were all so happy, elated. I thought, “There is going to be trouble.”’  
19 On the bus amid the Sinhalese women he was able to pass as Sinhalese, a fact that  
20 was disturbing to him. While Tamil self-understanding as a minority became more  
21 coherent in the aftermath of the riots, there are instances such as these, and in  
22 Sivanandan’s dressing up as a police officer to come to the aid of his parents, as well  
23 as other examples such as the one of the Sinhalese man who could not write the very  
24 language on behalf of which he was agitating against Tamils (Vittachi 1958, p. 25),  
25 which throw quite a different light on the meaning of these events. Generic figures of  
26 the Tamil and the Sinhalese were undoubtedly created out of individuals with names  
27 and biographies (Spencer 1990), but these cases also point to the emergence of deeper  
28 psychological structures of guilt and uncertainty in a time of crisis.

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3 *Feeling the need to leave*  
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8 Some Tamils assume control of their narrative by expressing the need to leave the  
9 country in the wake of what they had seen and heard. Sivanandan explained to his  
10 interviewers that,  
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17 The whole decadence and degradation of our people stank in my nostrils. I  
18 couldn't take it anymore. I just wanted to get away from my country. So I  
19 chucked in my job, sold whatever belongings I had and just pushed off to  
20 England (Sivanandan 1990, p. 9).  
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29 With a wife and children in tow, he could not have left without prior thought and  
30 consultation, but the sense of being left alienated and feeling compelled to leave is  
31 positively articulated in this reminiscence.  
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36 For those slightly older Tamils who had already begun to make a living in  
37 Ceylon by 1958, the riots are remembered in terms of their singularity and  
38 divisiveness, even at a personal level. Indeed, the whole period is the axis on which  
39 their identity as exiles, as Tamils, and even as men seems to turn. Sivanandan had to  
40 leave because, as his interviewers reminded him, 'you had people to support'  
41 (Sivanandan 1990, p. 9). Appu 'lived in Colombo and I hated the job. My brain cells  
42 were decaying...For me, in a way, this attack on the Tamils came as a blessing in  
43 disguise, so I thought I must get out.' Rajah, like a few of the other interviewees,  
44 remembered having to leave purely for economic reasons. Asked if he felt any  
45 antagonism in the country after the riots, he replied:  
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3 Not antagonism. I can notice that it was going to be difficult for the Tamils to  
4 live anywhere in Sri Lanka, because the language is most important for  
5 communication between both communities, but they [the Sinhalese] preferred  
6 to have all the dealings in their own language. They didn't want to know about  
7 us and they didn't want to give any instructions in English so I found it very  
8 difficult at the time to work in tea plantation, because all the government  
9 correspondence was in Sinhalese. Same thing in Colombo.  
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22 The main pattern of reasons given for leaving is a mixed one, however. For  
23 example, Thambi  
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29 ...had a large family and my pay, my remuneration at the British Council was  
30 not sufficient to give them, my six children a good education. I thought they  
31 would get a better education in England. In any case, I was fed up, with the Sri  
32 Lankan attitude, to the Tamil people, the discrimination against the Tamils. So  
33 I thought I'd get out, and I was happy, living here now forty, three years and, I  
34 don't regret, having come here...I sometimes feel sorry that I left Jaffna. But of  
35 course in retrospect, I couldn't have done all these things [he lists the  
36 organizations he helped to set up in the UK] and so many other small, projects.  
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51 When an individual remembers their past in this binding way, bringing together many  
52 elements within the ambit of a pivotal earlier decision, they are constructing a  
53 mythology of themselves. The memory of the aftermath of 1958 affords an  
54 opportunity to justify the individual life.  
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*The return to normality*

There were some members of the interviewed group, particularly the younger men, for whom the riots were not such an exceptional event. Nathan had to leave his place of work for a short period, but was able to cope with the disruption: 'At that time we were all exempt because of problems...we were asked to return when everything was normal. After one month we returned.' He explained that he only left Ceylon later to seek further education. Ananthan went to Colombo to study in 1959. He remembered that 'this was the year after the riots...It was all right.' Although things returned to normal quite quickly he remembered his visit to study in Colombo as the year 'after the riots'. Even when the actuality of violence does not impinge on memory, the event still orders biographical details. When asked about the year of his marriage, Nathan replied, 'Actually we married in '58. Just after the riots I married [laughs].' He also remembered being 'pushed into the South jungle' to work for the Ceylon Irrigation Department: 'I was in Hambantota, Ambalangoda...past Galle, near Kataragama...Then we moved to Kantale. That was the riots, '58.'

There are differences between the perceptions of Tamils who were working in Ceylon in 1958 and the younger Tamils. The latter were students who observed things deteriorating much later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, especially in relation to their educational and professional opportunities. Ratnam, one of the younger Tamils from the interviewed group, who went to London to study in 1963, remembered: 'I was in Badulla during the '58 riots, I didn't feel much because I was in the Bank of Ceylon so I was well looked after...when I looked back [it was clearer].' The older Tamils were more deeply moved by the loss signified by the riots than the younger ones, for whom the event was remembered as a momentary blip amid the essential continuity

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3 of life in Ceylon. Only in the light of later events did it assume for them the character  
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5 of a sign of things to come.  
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## 10 11 12 13 **Conclusion**

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17 ...this didn't start in 1983: 1958, 1967, 1972, 1977, 1983 so it was  
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19 gradually building. (Rasan)  
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24 Rasan remembered the 1958 riots as an early flashpoint within a growing conflict. As  
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26 with the other interviewees, his encounter with the past is associative and continuous  
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28 (Antze and Lambek 1996, p. xxv). Furthermore it is an encounter that, while deeply  
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30 felt in the being of the individual, also has a collective aspect that proves useful to  
31  
32 remembering. The memory of violence in 1958 entered a cycle of explanation that  
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34 gained momentum over time, subsisting in political polarization along ethnic lines and  
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36 increasingly organized forms of violence (Nissan and Stirrat 1990).  
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41 Memories of the 1958 riots vary in the context of what is remembered of the  
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43 more destructive riots of 1983 (Kanapathipillai 1992). For example, some  
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45 interviewees compared the two events by recalling that in 1958 at least the army has  
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47 been on their side, whereas in 1983 the army had sometimes colluded with anti-Tamil  
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49 rioters. Younger generations of immigrant Tamils in the UK, having experienced both  
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51 the 1983 riots as well as the conflict and division of the recent war, regard earlier Sri  
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53 Lankan conflicts as having occurred in a different world to the one they know, in  
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55 which the differences between Tamils and Sinhalese appear to be far more fixed and  
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57 certain.  
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3 For those who actually lived through the violence of late May-June 1958 the  
4 riots presented a shock to the normal order of things and as such it quickly became  
5 mythologized. Authority that was vested with the responsibility to ensure Tamils'  
6 safety as citizens appeared to be either powerless to act or unwilling to intervene at  
7 the crucial moment. Of greater impact than the physical and emotional memory of  
8 violence, which was often remembered through the experience of others, was the  
9 altered image of the state in its response, or more precisely in the lack of an adequate  
10 response. Some Tamils tried to make sense of perceived state intransigence by  
11 providing constructive responses through the discourse of discrimination. Their  
12 suffering included injuries and losses imposed by violence and deprivation but also  
13 psychological forms such as non-recognition of their language (Horowitz 2000, pp.  
14 220, 222). They achieved a form of symbolic closure by writing and campaigning in  
15 English on behalf of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and other oppressed minorities.  
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34 The meaning of the 1958 riots among Tamils living in the UK also belongs to  
35 the deeper understanding of Tamils' sense of having lost out in Sri Lanka after  
36 independence, as today after the war, and yet having to live on, to make do in some  
37 way (Wilson 1994, p.21; BBC News 2010). While this is not to offer a reified  
38 collective memory, as if were able to determine unstable individual memories, it is  
39 nevertheless to state a common perception that is maintained alongside other, often  
40 contradictory, perceptions, such as that of Tamil 'success' wherever they settle (Steen  
41 1993, p. 200; Thompson 2000, p. 133). So, for example, in 2002, when most of the  
42 interviews in this study took place, in the midst of the conflict between the LTTE and  
43 the Sri Lankan government, Tamil interviewees who had supported or acquiesced in  
44 parliamentary politics during the 1950s and 60s tried to bridge the gap between their  
45 earlier choices and the widespread contemporary Tamil (and international) support for  
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3 armed conflict. They could look back to an era of Tamil negotiation and compromise,  
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5 backed by non-violent protest, as a legitimate form of political action. When political  
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7 violence erupted in Sri Lanka from the late 1970s, however, this older generation  
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9 were left in a difficult position. Looking back on those changes during their interview,  
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11 each tried to affirm that at least their own struggle had been righteous in its way.  
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3 **Notes**  
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8 1. Ceylon was officially re-named Sri Lanka in 1972. In this essay the two names will  
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10 be used interchangeably depending on the period that is being referred to.  
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