

## *Book Review*

### **The Tamil Separatist War in Sri Lanka**

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**Wickremesekara, Channa. 2016. *The Tamil Separatist War in Sri Lanka*. Routledge: New York, pp. x+270.**

The long drawn separatist conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is generally identified as an ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority population. Given that there are widespread stereotypes about the LTTE insurgency in South Asia and beyond, any scholarly understanding of the Sri Lankan conflict requires a proper historicisation of the demographic and ethnic characteristics that led to the deep-seeded hostilities between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Much of the long pre-colonial history of Sri Lanka was characterized by ethno-religious pluralism and co-existence over antagonism and conflict. The book under review, however, does not provide a detailed historicisation of the conflict but a comprehensive mapping of multiple trajectories of the prolonged war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state. The separatist war in Sri Lanka is also a momentous event in modern South Asian history. It evolved from a low-intensity conflict into a massive insurgency operation that became lethal for the Sri Lankan state. These developments have changed the social and political map of Sri Lanka and of the South Asian region at large. In recent years, several insightful works (Subramanian 2015, Sunila Galappatti, 2016) have engaged with the diverse historical, regional and ethno-political aspects of this long-drawn war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, which ended with the defeat of the Tigers in 2009. Among them, Channa Wickremesekara's informative account of the conflict occupies a prominent place.

The book provides, according to Wickremesekara, a military history of the conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government by tracing its evolution from a battle between a guerrilla force and a mainly

ceremonial army, to one of an organised guerrilla force with semi-conventional capability and a state military apparatus that had transformed itself into a large and potent force with modern armour, aircraft and naval vessels (p. 2). Focusing on the key military events of the war, Wickremesekara compares war tactics from both ends of the spectrum to provide the reader a detailed account of the conflict.

The book is divided into thirteen short chapters. The first two chapters highlight how the Tamils became a dominant ethnic group in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka since its independence in 1948. Although the Eastern province had been home for Sinhalese and Muslims since pre-colonial times, according to Wickremesekara, the influx of Tamils to the East is a recent phenomenon. The northern Jaffna peninsula, however, has been the heartland of Tamils for centuries (p. 6). By the time of its independence, with no proper standing army, the Sri Lankan government grew apprehensive about the dominance of the Tamils in the northern region. It is not until 1956 that a new infantry unit called Sinhala Regiment was created to fend off potential threats to Sri Lanka's sovereignty, particularly the looming Tamil nationalism. In that respect, Wickremesekara locates the genesis of the conflict to the demographic distribution of the island; a Tamil majority in the Northern part and a Sinhala majority in the South and the West, wherein the two linguistic groups set themselves against one another for political dominance. In chapter 10, "The Rise and fall of the Unceasing Waves", Wickremesekara discusses the subsequent developments that led to the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE, the powerful guerrilla group championing for Tamil nationalism. Wickremesekara also provides a brief history of several other armed groups like the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) that were leading the charge against the Sri Lankan state. By 1976, Velupillai Prabhakaran had crushed all other rival groups through violent attacks to gain dominance, eventually forming the LTTE (p. 12).

Yet, the ultimate military defeat of the LTTE was to undergo severe changes in their organizational prowess and tactical methods. The gradual decline of the Tigers through military and diplomatic interventions helped the Sri Lankan Security Forces to achieve their lost position since 1950s. In chapter 10, Wickremesekara rightly points out that the long drawn war was unable to offer decisive strategic advantages to the contemporary situation. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the three decades long civil war between the separatist LTTE and the Sri Lankan army had far reaching impact on the questions of nationalism, security and sovereignty in the South Asian context. In this respect, the book captures a decisive shift in the attitude of the Western nations as well as the surrounding nations, most specifically India's tactical approach to the Sri Lankan state and the activities of the LTTE.

Despite increasing Indian surveillance, Wickremesekara argues that the LTTE continued their operation mainly from Tanjavour and Coimbatore in South India. During the 1980s, they also improved their seamanship to tackle the balances of power. Therefore, the emergence of the Sea Tigers as a separate and deadly arm of the rebels posed a serious challenge to the operation of the Sri Lankan navy, which was in its nascent state in the 1980s. Seizing upon this vulnerability, the LTTE launched a series of assaults on the Sri Lankan navy, while introducing their suicide cadres – known as ‘Sea Tigers’ – into their naval wing to intensify the damage. Initially concentrated around Jaffna and the north-eastern shorelines, the LTTE’s naval operations gradually expanded to the western coast (p. 102, 103). Against this hostile background, the Sri Lankan Army formed the Sri Lankan Special Force which comprised of ex-rebels, members of anti-Tamil groups, Muslim militants and carefully selected Sinhala personnel. The Special Force was a brainchild of the former Army Commander Lionel Balagalle, which received highly specialised commando-type training to combat against the possible attacks of the Tamil Tigers (p. 168).

Starting with the killing of the Jaffna mayor in 1975, the conflict ended with the deaths of over 100,000 people in May 2009. The long war of almost thirty years between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government was massive in scale and brutal in nature (p. 234, 235). As the author notes, the Tamil Tiger’s war strategy and the ferocity offered a serious challenge to the Sri Lankan Security Forces:

Initially, the Tamil Rebels started with a few dozen committed but ill-armed and trained militants fighting against the Sri Lankan army. During the course of the war, the Tamil Tigers built up armed forces that included heavy artillery and thousands of uniformed, highly trained and well-armed personnel and even created a small but lethal navy and a rudimentary air force. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan Security Forces expanded into tens of thousands of soldiers backed up by a growing fleet of tanks and APCs, a potent arsenal of heavy artillery and an increasingly sophisticated air force and navy (234).

In spite of the vast historical canvas that Wickremesekara covers, he tends to simplify China’s involvement in the conflict, restricting it to the supply of weapons at various stages, while understating the Chinese economic interests in the island. By the same token, the author’s uncritical treatment of the role of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in suppressing the Tigers may not bode well for both the sympathisers and the supporters of the Tamil nationalist cause. Given that much of the book depends mainly on media reports, some interviews and several secondary materials, the reader lacks access to the historical and cultural dimension of the conflict. Having said that, *The Tamil*

*Separatist War in Sri Lanka* serves as a fine reference work for both beginner and expert readers on Sri Lanka's conflict.

### **Works Cited**

- Galappatti, Sunila, 2016. *A Long Watch: War, Captivity and Return in Sri Lanka*. Harper Collins: London.
- Subramanian, Samanth. 2015. *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War*. Atlantic Books: London.