The Political Formation of Cultures: South Asian and Other Experiences

Neelan Tiruchelvam
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It is indeed a great honour to have been invited to deliver this address in memory of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam. I am not sure I deserve the honour, but I am very glad to be here. I had the privilege of meeting Neelan twice. When I met him the second time at a conference in Montreal a little over a year before his death, I had the opportunity to speak to him at length. He spoke to me about my interests, including a research project I had just begun to conceptualize, on the politics of family law in India. Neelan proposed a conference on family law in South Asia, to be held at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, meant to lead to a volume on the subject. That was however not to be while Neelan was with us. Neelan left a lasting impression even on those like me who met him only a few times.

When Mr. Thambirajah invited me to deliver this lecture, I welcomed this opportunity all the more because it made possible my first trip to Sri Lanka. Although this is my first trip here, I have engaged for some time with things happening in Sri Lanka. This engagement from a distance began exactly twenty two years back, when things began to fall apart in this part of the world. Many experienced the events of July 1983 so, although the violence had its roots in earlier

events. On the 29th of July 1983, I was in Madras city, as it was called then. I recall the horror on the streets of Madras the next day. I remember overhearing someone remark on Mount Road, one of the main roads of Madras city, that such attacks would not have been possible had a Dravida Nadu been formed. The reference was to the goal that the Dravidian movement had entertained at one point of forming a separate country including the predominantly Tamil-speaking areas and perhaps also other regions of south India. The suggestion clearly was that the presence of a neighbouring ethnic kin state ready to act in solidarity with the Tamils of Sri Lanka would have deterred Sinhala attacks on Tamils here. The spectre of precisely such Tamil solidarity across the Palk Straits, and of solidarity between Indians and the Tamil-speakers of Sri Lanka, contributed to the wariness among many Sinhalese of many of the demands of Sri Lankan Tamil-speakers such as for the greater devolution of power and the increased official recognition of the Tamil language.

If the violence of July 1983 evoked in me an engagement with aspects of Sri Lankan politics and society, this was partly because I was concerned about the growth of collective violence around the world. But, there was also an ethnic dimension to my empathy with those who were attacked in Colombo in July 1983. Tamil was the first language I spoke and I spent much of my childhood and boyhood in the predominantly Tamil-speaking regions of India. While I saw myself as an internationalist and a socialist concerned about civil and political rights around the world, violence directed against fellow Tamil-speakers cut closer to the bone than the ongoing violence in Punjab and Assam in India, and in regions further off like the southern Philippines, South Africa, El Salvador, the Basque region or northern Ireland. My earliest political memory is of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (the DMK), which mobilized partly around Tamil identity, coming to power in 1967 in the state of Tamil Nadu, where I lived then. The DMK was an offshoot of the Dravidian movement which aimed to form a Dravida Nadu, whose existence was considered of direct relevance for the prospects of ethnic violence in Colombo by the

person I heard on a Madras city street on July 30, 1983. Although I did not support the DMK or the Dravidian movement, the politics of Tamil identity which ruled the streets through which I walked as a boy had shaped my political sensibilities and influenced my response to ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. This not only lent the claim of the unidentified man on Mount Road a superficial plausibility, it also urged me to study the politics of the Dravidian parties in my first book, titled *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India.*

Identity Movements and Group Cultures

Please pardon my sharing with you what may seem like scattered reminiscences. They are meant to motivate my discussion of political and cultural mobilization. Outcomes such as the sharpening of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the growth of Tamil nationalism in Tamil Nadu are often seen as political expressions of deep-seated cultural mores and cultural differences. Even if the levels of conflict or cooperation between ethnic groups may vary depending on changing political circumstances, the boundaries between these groups are themselves often taken to have been cast long before mass political movements mobilized people based on group identity. If ethnic kin living in different states feel an affinity with each other and act on that basis, this is often considered a natural expression of group belonging. Ethnic mobilizers lend such views credence when they claim to express the enduring spirit of cultural groups.

Does identity-based mobilization express a preexisting cultural logic? Or does it form the cultures it claims to represent? My work on the Dravidian parties of south India points to the political salience of different visions of community in Tamil Nadu from the early 20th century to the 1950s. On the one hand, the main representative of pan-Indian nationalism, the Congress party, was much stronger than the political vehicles of Tamil nationalism through this period. On the other, many activists of the pan-Indian parties shared Tamil

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nationalist sentiments. The Dravidian parties mobilized behind appeals to the middle and the lower castes at least as much as to the glory of the Tamil language and the need for the greater recognition of this language. However, their relationships with the associations of particular intermediate and lower castes were fraught with tension, and such associations allied themselves as often with pan-Indian parties as with the Dravidian parties. If the Dravidian parties appealed to marginal groups, so did the communists, who spoke the language of class more than that of caste even while they drew much of their support from lower caste groups. These ideologically diverse political forces aggregated the concerns of a range of Tamil Nadu's major groups in different ways, and enjoyed significant pockets of support by the 1950s. The cultures of twentieth century Tamil Nadu could clearly be incorporated into different political projects, articulating various views of political community.

The Dravidian parties of Tamil Nadu were not exceptional in their ambiguous relationship to the local cultures that preexisted their growth. The Pakistan movement claimed to represent the Muslims of British India, who they claimed constituted a distinct nation. Yet, the All India Muslim League, which led this movement, enjoyed greatest support until the late 1930s in regions which remained a part of India after decolonization, rather than the Muslim-majority regions, most of which became a part of Pakistan in 1947. So, the party's leadership was largely drawn from Muslim-minority areas and reflected the concerns of Muslim elites in these regions. The Pakistan movement spread rapidly to most Muslim-majority regions (except Kashmir) through the 1940s due to the growth of anxieties that Muslims would be marginalized in a Hindu majoritarian postcolonial India. It was also crucial that the leaders of the Muslim League crafted coalitions with Muslim political and religious elites in the Muslim-majority areas.

Did the social terrain of late colonial South Asia make the emergence of a movement representing a distinct Muslim nation very likely, perhaps inevitable? Some features of the colonial state's

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understanding and governance of British India made religious identities important bases of solidarity. Religion was the major basis on which colonial officials categorized the population of British India, although they also gave caste and language importance. This was best reflected in the census, which aggregated the members of particular religious groups into communities of definite sizes. Credible claims to represent religious groups often gained people access to state patronage. Separate electorates were carved out for Muslims. These were among the reasons for the growth of mobilization behind religious identity, specifically the formation of the Muslim League. Muslims being the second largest religious group, and forming the majority of the population in large areas of British India also aided the imagination of the Muslims of colonial India as a nation.

However, incentives remained strong to mobilize along other lines too, such as language, caste and class. They urged the majority of the Muslims of British India to support parties and movements not primarily associated with religious banners until the late 1930s. For instance, the Krishak Praja Party which dominated Bengali politics in the 1930s drew substantial support from both Muslims and Hindus, and the Unionist Party which dominated Punjabi politics through the same period counted many Hindus, Muslims as well as Sikhs among its supporters. Even in the Muslim-minority provinces, only a minority of the Muslims voted for the Muslim League a decade before the formation of Pakistan. The nature of late colonial Indian society clearly left space for political alternatives not based mainly on religious identification.

If colonial knowledge and colonial institutions privileged religious identity in India, they privileged language identity in Sri Lanka, to move to an example which would be even more familiar to you. While this encouraged mobilization behind language identity, it did not rule out other forms of solidarity. The revival of Buddhism was a more important focus of mobilization than the promotion of the Sinhala language through the first half of the twentieth century, and remained an important aspect of Sinhala nationalism even later.

Buddhist revivalists sometimes opposed Sinhala-speaking Christians more than Tamil-speakers in the early decades of the last century. While various Sri Lankan Tamil elites presumed to lead all the residents of the country who spoke the Tamil language, their efforts encountered resistance among Tamil-speaking Muslims as well as Tamil-speaking plantation workers. This led to the formation of distinct parties representing these groups, the Muslim Congress and the Ceylon Workers' Congress, which continue to play significant roles in Sri Lankan politics. Later Sri Lankan Tamil political forces would respond to such impudence with attempts to expel Muslims from the eastern province. Contrary to the claims of many later Sinhala and Tamil militants, it was not preordained that language would be the major cleavage in the postcolonial Sri Lankan polity.

Identity Movements and Cultural Change

If identity movements and parties do not express group cultures in the only ways in which they can be expressed, do they reshape cultures in the process of mobilization? If they are successful in gaining considerable support among their target community, do they thereby come to represent group culture in important ways? What changes in institutions and strategies accompany such political formations of culture?

Identity-based political forces attempt to sharpen group boundaries to clearly delineate the groups they wish to mobilize and differentiate them from other proximate groups. This is true to some extent even of movements which are inclusive to an extent and deploy subtly layered identities. The Dravidian movement was one such political force. One of the its major leaders, C.N.Annadurai, the founding leader of the DMK, related in his journal *Nam Naadu* an experience he had while engaged in an agitation in 1953 to augment the territory that would be part of the state of Madras, later renamed Tamil Nadu. Language identities were crucial in this context as the boundaries between the states of Madras and Andhra Pradesh were being drawn along the lines of language use. Annadurai was

campaigning in the regions that are now along the borders between these states. When he asked a shepherd he met in the course of his campaign whether he was a Tamil or a Telugu, he found to his dismay that the categories and distinction he introduced meant nothing to the boy. Perhaps the boy's speech included words from both languages. Perhaps the boy was aware of Tamil and Telugu as referents to languages, but not to the identities of individuals.

Annadurai bemoaned what he considered the boy's low level of ethnic consciousness, clearly wishing to urge people to assume a definite and exclusive language identity. The shepherd in question did not seem to suffer because he did not share his interrogator's classificatory scheme. I understand that the same was not true of individuals who attempted to reject the vision of the so-called rioters who questioned them about their ethnic identity on the streets of Colombo on July 29, 1983. Over a generation of ethnicized politics had sharpened the boundaries between the two categories that mattered most, Sinhala and Tamil, so that people could not evade their comprehensive and mutually exclusive character. In response to the question "Are you Sinhala or are you Tamil?," answers such as "Sri Lankan" and "Christian" made little sense that day.

The ways in which political forces construct group cultures are associated with particular political strategies. For instance, the dominant constructions of Sri Lankan Tamil identity until the 1970s emphasized the long history of literary production in Tamil. This view of Tamil identity was associated with the significant roles of group members in Western education and the bureaucracy, and with electoral participation to promote constitutional changes such as the introduction of federalism and the greater official recognition of Tamil. The Tamil Congress and the Federal Party, the major Sri Lankan Tamil parties of the first postcolonial generation, had limited success in achieving these goals. The decrease in the recruitment of Sri Lankan Tamils to the bureaucracy and the professions suggested that aptitude in education would be no guarantee of reasonable life chances. The army's attack on the Jaffna Library in 1981 directly destroyed some of the textual artefacts which occupied a central place in the sense of

identity of many Sri Lankan Tamils. These circumstances raised questions for many Sri Lankan Tamils about the viability of an ethnic strategy focused on electoral participation and recruitment to the bureaucracy, and the value of a predominantly textual construction of group identity. The militant movement which came to dominate Sri Lankan Tamil politics from the 1980s adopted an alternative strategy of armed insurgency, perhaps for secession. It associated this strategy with a reconstructed group identity emphasizing the military powers of ancient Tamil kingdoms and memorializing the militants who died in the civil war of the last two decades.

Identity-based political forces vary in the extent to which they aim to promote cultural change. They may be divided into two ideal-types: first, those which instrumentally deploy cultural banners to help build broad social coalitions and gain access to resources and power; and second, those which prioritize cultural change, sacrificing some support, resources and power if necessary to promote the norms they value. Instrumental identity movements usually keeps their constructions of group culture capacious, to broaden the coalition which can identify with such a cultural vision. Movements such as the Pakistan movement, the Bangladesh movement, Hindu nationalism, Kashmiri nationalism, and Moro nationalism belong in this category.

The Pakistan movement's major leaders were modernists, in some cases atheists, who operated with a secular geography of a Muslim-majority state or autonomous region. But, they also built alliances with some religious literati (*ulema*) and invited some of the faithful to entertain a millenarian vision of Pakistan as the land of the pure. Hindu nationalists claimed to offer an inclusive cultural vision of the Hindu as he (not she) who conceived India as his fatherland, his native land and his sacred land. They focused on the practices of the upper and upper-middle castes of northern and western India to animate their sense of Hindu identity, but also reached out to other groups - the middle and the lower castes, and eastern and southern Indians. The Moro nationalists of the southern Philippines used the

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Moro category which the Spaniards had employed in earlier centuries to refer to the Muslims of Spain, North Africa and the Philippines. This blanket category included the speakers of different languages - the Tausug, the Maguindanao and the Maranao; and included people with different attitudes towards the relative value of local customs and textual Islam.

The purposive type of identity movement specifies group norms more precisely, and equates them with the practices it values. The Sikh movement in India, the Islamist movements of Malaysia and Indonesia, and the Protestant fundamentalists of the United States are examples of such movements. The Sikh movement associated Sikh identity primarily with the practices of the Gobindpanthi sect, and built a vision of the Sikh man as a militaristic lion among certain agrarian and artisanal castes. In the process, it marginalized sects like the Nanakpanthis which regarded Sikh tradition differently, as well as the lower castes. The main party which emerged from this movement, the Shiromani Akali Dal, deployed such a vision of Sikh identity, although in the process it lost the support of most Sikhs of the lower castes to its major competitor, the Congress party. Some Sikh secessionists of the 1980s attacked members of the Nirankari sect located along the Sikh-Hindu boundary as much as they attacked those who identified themselves exclusively as Hindus. Many Islamists of Indonesia value the so-called *santri* practices associated with either Islam's founding texts or the practices of the Arab peninsula, in the process abandoning the so-called *abangan* Muslims more attached to local custom.

If identity-based movements and parties mobilize considerable support, their understanding of group culture and the style in which they articulate this understanding acquire some authority. Group members who are uncomfortable with such characterizations or opposed to them face the dilemma of either conforming to the dominant style and swallowing their misgivings or risking marginalization. This is particularly true of purposive identity movements. The Sikh movement associated in the popular imagination the image of the

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Sikh man with practices initially specific to the Gobindpanthi sect such as the wearing of long hair and a turban, and carrying a double-edged knife or sword. The Islamists of Southeast Asia increased practices originating in the Arab peninsula such as the wearing of the hijab and the burqa among Muslim women, and devalued local practices such as wearing the sarong, providing daughters inheritance rights equal to those of sons, and recognizing extensive post-divorce rights for women. Besides, they increased popular knowledge of Islam's founding texts, as well as contact with the Arab world.

Even instrumental identity movements often introduce some changes in group practices and in the institutional recognition of these practices, although they do not prioritize such changes. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Pakistan movement, was an atheist who did not observe Muslim taboos against drinking liquor and eating pork. However, he began to assemble the coalition for the formation of Pakistan through the introduction of the Muslim Personal Law Application Act (also called the Shariat Act) in India's Central Assembly in 1937. This Act decreed that Islamic law, rather than customs specific to sect, caste and region, would govern India's Muslims in most family law matters. Jinnah saw in the Act's recognition of British India's Muslims as sharing a way of life a basis to argue that this group was a distinct political community. By initiating the passage of the Act, the Muslim League gained the support of sections of the ulema, who wanted somewhat conservative interpretations of Islamic law to govern family life among India's Muslims.

This step, which the Muslim League took to consolidate a coalition in favour of the formation of Pakistan, reinforced in the eyes of many of the Muslims of South Asia the link between Muslim identity and being governed by Anglo-Muhammadan law. Anglo-Muhammadan law is the hybrid jurisprudence which emerged in the courts of colonial India by interpreting aspects of Islamic legal tradition in terms of British common law. The link between Muslim identity and Islamic law did not get weakened in the three countries

which emerged from British India - Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. This was an important reason why Anglo-Muhammadan law continued to govern the family life of Muslims in these countries, with some modifications. The Pakistan movement's path to success thus had an enduring effect on the regulation of aspects of everyday life among most South Asian Muslims.

The cultural effects of other instrumental identity movements were more closely related to the movements' construction of group culture. For instance, Hindu nationalists valued the extensive use of words originating in Sanskrit, the language of many major Hindu texts, when speaking and writing the Hindi language. They increased the use of Sanskritic words among their core support groups, as well as in the official media when they were in power in India or in particular Indian states. The Dravidianists helped develop and deployed a form of Tamil in which the usage of words originating in Sanskrit or other north Indian languages was reduced. The political dominance of the Dravidianists gave the form of Tamil the Dravidianists preferred a preponderant role in public speech and the media. It relegated the more Sanskritic variants of Tamil largely to the homes of the Brahmin upper caste. Brahmins, who typically use a Sanskritic Tamil dialect, had to adopt the new Tamil if they were to succeed in political life.

Political forces influence popular culture mainly by establishing a substantial presence in society. Movements and parties which mobilize significant sections of a society build somewhat distinct sub-cultures. These sub-cultures are associated with specific views of self, group and society; with membership in institutions such as trade unions, social clubs, cultural societies, places of worship and street gangs; and with particular social habits, such as meeting friends in particular tea stalls, bars and restaurants.

Successful identity-based political forces usually form distinct sub-cultures. The sub-cultures they form are often popularly associated with the identities which these movements and parties mobilize. For instance, some equate the sub-cultures of Hindu

nationalism with Hindu identity; others associate the sub-cultures of Islamist parties with Muslim identity; and yet others associate the sub-cultures of the Dravidian parties with Dravidian identity. This is the case although partisan sub-cultures rarely include everyone on whose behalf identity movements claim to speak, and sometimes include members of other cultural groups. For instance, many think of Islamist sub-cultures as exemplars of lived Muslim identity although many Muslims do not belong to Islamist sub-cultures. On the other hand, the Dravidianist sub-cultures included many whose ancestry differed from the way Dravidian identity was popularized, either along the axis of language (i.e., Tamil-speaking) or that of caste (i.e., non-Brahmin or middle caste).

The lack of overlap between membership in an ancestral group and membership in the sub-cultures of movements claiming to represent this group is addressed by claims that group membership is tied to particular practices and worldviews which do not follow necessarily from ancestry. For instance, Hindu nationalists typically believe that Hindu identity is tied to viewing India as a Hindu nation, speaking a Sanskritic Hindi, and being wary of the claims of non-Hindus, especially Muslims. Those who regard themselves as Hindus, but do not conform to these views and practices are deemed less Hindu or not Hindu at all, at least for political purposes. This preempts the dilemma which those who equate Hindu identity with Hindu nationalist sub-cultures might face because the majority of Hindus are not Hindu nationalists.

Political forces which do not emphasize the identities of particular cultural groups have also formed durable sub-cultures - forces such as the communist, socialist, radical and Christian Democratic movements in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere. The formation of sub-cultures is a crucial way in which movements and parties bring about cultural change.

Identity Movements, Prior Alignments and Preexisting Material Cultures

I have so far emphasized how identity movements which are successful in mobilization introduce cultural change, usually along the lines suggested by their constructions of group identity. I now ask the following questions: Do such movement-induced cultural changes face constraints and resistance? Do successful identity movements erase preexisting cultural affinities, social solidarities, political alignments and material cultures which are not compatible with their construction of group identities? Or do they engage with these prior formations, leading to the emergence of hybrids, and sometimes fail to overcome resistance to their transformative ambitions?

Considerable evidence suggests that prior affinities, solidarities and cultures resist the homogenizing drives of identity movements, even if these movements gather considerable support. I return to the example of the Pakistan movement to illustrate this. The Pakistan movement's rapid growth through the last colonial decade changed partisan alignments dramatically in the regions that became part of Pakistan in 1947. The Muslim League, which was barely present in these regions in 1937, won the elections of 1946 there, handily for the most part.

However, a crucial reason for the institutional growth of the Muslim League in the future Pakistan was the incorporation into the Muslim League of much of the Muslim components of some parties with prior local strength, like the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal and the Unionist Party in Punjab. Such province-specific political forces retained their distinctive concerns even while they supported the demand for Pakistan. For instance, considerable autonomy for the provinces, the official recognition of the Bengali language, and the substantial redistribution of agricultural land were major priorities of the leaders of the Krishak Praja Party. This was true of Fazl-ul Haq, who led the Krishak Praja Party. The repression of the agitations in

Bengal against the introduction of Urdu as Pakistan's sole official language urged Fazl-ul Haq to leave the Muslim League to revive his earlier party in 1953 with a slightly different label, the Krishak Sramik Party. Parties like the Krishak Sramik Party joined hands to rout the Muslim League in all the provinces in Pakistan's first provincial elections of 1954. The Muslim League had clearly not overcome prior alignments and concerns, which became more prominent after the formation of Pakistan.

Preexisting regional parties and the concerns of language groups were not the only sources of opposition to the early postcolonial Pakistani regime. The name Pakistan referred both to the regions included in early dreams of the country's territorial contours and to the millenarian promise that this country would be a land of the pure. The latter interpretation was particularly relevant to the religious literati and seers who campaigned for the country's formation. These groups and those they moved were dismayed when Jinnah, Pakistan's first Governor General, declared in his speech to mark the transfer of power from the British that Pakistan would be a secular country. They had greater influence over early postcolonial policy-making than the Bengali nationalists did. So, the first Constituent Assembly could not decide on the role of religion in public life, delaying the adoption of a constitution until a different non-elected assembly adopted one nine years after Pakistan's formation.

Prior affinities, solidarities and cultures mediate the cultural effects of enduring political forces like the Dravidian parties, not just forces which rise and fall rapidly like the Muslim League. While the Muslim League fragmented and declined soon after Pakistan's formation, the Dravidian parties dominated politics in Tamil Nadu for almost four decades and continue to do so. The extent and social composition of support for the Dravidian parties and the orientations of their activists and supporters varied across region. These developments depended crucially on prior patterns of stratification and solidarity; and the strength, support bases and orientations of rival parties.

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The Dravidian parties aimed to promote upward mobility among the middle castes, and sometimes among the lower castes. So, the role of caste in stratification influenced the experience of the Dravidian parties. The patterns of caste-based stratification varied across Tamil Nadu. Caste was correlated more with status and social class, and caste relations were particularly polarized in the state's major river valleys. These valleys were characterized by high land concentration, with many of the major landlords being from the upper castes. Unfree or partly free labour, drawn predominantly from the lower castes, accounted for a high share of the population there. Land ownership was less concentrated, caste was less correlated with class and status, the lower castes were less numerous, and more members of the intermediate castes enjoyed considerable social power in the plains and uplands of Tamil Nadu.

The Dravidian parties engaged with the different material cultures of these regions. The DK and the DMK appealed most to the middle castes all around Tamil Nadu. In the major valleys, they built alliances between some middle caste groups and sections of the lower castes, and battled some forms of caste-based exclusion which these groups experienced. In the plains and the uplands, these parties were associated with relatively powerful intermediate caste groups, augmented preexisting social networks linking these groups, and clearly opposed lower caste aspirations more often.

The social niches occupied by older parties influenced the extent of the Dravidian parties' success. The pan-Indian parties had significant pockets of durable support in the valleys, and in the southern and western plains. This limited the scope for the growth of the Dravidian parties in these regions until the 1970s. The Congress party was dominated by landlords, the communists built support largely among lower caste agricultural workers and sharecroppers, and the Dravidian parties became popular among some intermediate castes and middling peasants in the Kaveri valley in central Tamil Nadu. The pan-Indian parties were weakest in the northern plains, where the DMK gained the most extensive support through the 1950s

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and 1960s. In southern and western Tamil Nadu, the DMK could not end the dominance of the pan-Indian parties. Only a later Dravidian party, the AIADMK, which gave less importance than the DMK to middle caste ambitions and language demands, gained considerable support in these regions from the 1970s.

The engagement of the Dravidian parties with prior social solidarities shaped the nature of their sub-cultures. It thereby influenced the nature of the political alternatives which emerged when the dominance of the Dravidian parties began to slowly decline in the 1990s. The DMK's engagement in middle caste militancy meant that in this party's early strongholds, the most important alternative to emerge was the PMK, a party representing a locally numerous middle caste. As the DMK had built close links between some middle caste Hindus and Muslims in these regions, the growth of Hindu nationalism through much of India from the 1980s did not extend to these parts. Hindu nationalism became a viable alternative to the Dravidian parties in the parts of Tamil Nadu where the DMK was never strong, i.e., in the south and the west.

By Way of a Conclusion: Aspects of the Political Formation of Culture in Sri Lanka

This talk has addressed the impact of various identity-based political forces on group boundaries, group cultures, and patterns of contention. It would be peculiar if it said little about Sri Lanka considering that ethnic politics plays a central role here, and the possibility is in the air of compromise over some of the central issues that have divided the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil militant movement for long. I feel this would be especially inappropriate as the talk is part of a series in honour of Neelan Tiruchelvam, who engaged so centrally in life and in death with the travails of this ethnicized polity, and sought ways to end the generation-long civil war. So, I venture some comments on the political formation of culture in Sri Lanka earlier and the prospects of its re-formation now. In

doing so, I am quite aware that all or most of you have directly experienced these processes, while my observations come from a distance, perhaps a safe distance. Considering these circumstances, I request of you an attitude of some charity toward any misunderstandings on my part.

I referred to Sri Lankan experiences earlier to illustrate my discussion of the political formation of group boundaries and cultures. Specifically, I pointed to the changes in the ways that major Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic mobilizers constructed group identity with the emergence of the militant movement. The strategies of an earlier generation of Sri Lankan Tamil politicians involved electoral participation, electoral alliances with the major Sinhala parties, and non-violent agitation for constitutional change. The ethnic composition and geographic distribution of the population, the existence of a unitary state, the emergence of an ethnicized party system, the tendency of the two major parties to outbid each other on Sinhala majoritarian policies and promises, and the first-past-the-post electoral rules gave the parties of the Sri Lankan Tamils very little ability to achieve their major goals. Sinhala majoritarianism grew, and led to incidents of anti-Tamil violence of increasing frequency and intensity.

This led to the emergence of militant groups, their resort to armed insurgency, and the adoption of the goal of secession by some militant groups. An embrace of militarized constructions of Tamil culture accompanied these strategic choices. If many Sri Lankan Tamils felt that they and their community could seek justice only by taking to arms, the circumstances had much to do with the growth of this feeling. The militant movement appeared to hold the promise of giving Sri Lankan Tamils a more effective political voice, and contributing to the deepening of democracy.

The situation began to change in the mid-1990s. After over a decade of civil war, a sense grew among Sinhala policy-makers and Tamil militants that the war could not be won, and the feeling increased among many civilians that the war was a series of harrowing losses. This changed the context in which periodic negotiations took place

between the contending parties to the civil war. A significant body of opinion grew within the SLFP and the UNP in favour of compromise on the crucial issues of the devolution of power and official language policy so that the war could be ended. This enabled the rise of politicians open to the introduction of such changes to the leadership of the two major parties. The pressure exerted by the militant movement was crucial to the emergence of these changes. If some powerful Sinhalese no longer roared like lions, this was crucially because some Tamils had growled like tigers for some time. The constriction of the militants' transnational resource networks especially since September 11, 2001 also pressed the militants to consider compromise and the abandonment of secessionism.

The militant movement made possible openings for compromise and a peace more just than the one that preceded the civil war. However, the militarized construction of Tamil ethnicity and the strategic orientations which accompany it at least delayed a settlement, and might still prevent one. If the circumstances of the 1970s and the 1980s called forth a militaristic formation of Tamil culture, the situation today requires the re-formation of political culture.

We can only hope that the pressures operating on both sides will lead to a settlement. If peace is to endure, it is crucial that a pluralistic polity be built. An important step towards this end is the effective contestation of militarized constructions of Sinhala and Tamil ethnicity. While visions which contest militarism exist, attacks from ethnic extremists eroded the sub-cultures embodying these visions. These sub-cultures need to be revitalized. The growth of alternative visions of identity and citizenship should constrain those who might wish to continue to roar like lions and growl like tigers. Or rather, more people should learn that the beasts of the jungle coexist at least as often as they threaten or attack each other, even if they see themselves as lions or tigers. Some of the legacies of the long civil war and the terms on which it ends may hinder efforts to build alternatives to militarism. However, peace will only brighten the prospects of such alternatives. Besides, if such alternatives are not built, it would mean that the likes of Neelan died in vain. That cannot be.