

# Smouldering

NAMIT ARORA

Samanth Subramanian

THIS DIVIDED ISLAND  
Stories from the Sri Lankan war  
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Samanth Subramanian, a Tamil from India, grew up in Madras, Tamil Nadu. Sri Lanka's proximity but also its "ties of politics and language", he writes, bound it to Tamil Nadu "like a tugboat to an ocean liner". Sri Lankan news "made bigger headlines than news from distant New Delhi" and its relentless civil war became "a constant acquaintance". He recalls the commotion on his train to Madras when news came that a suicide bomber, "a toothy, bespectacled woman with flowers in her hair", had assassinated Rajiv Gandhi. Subramanian wondered about her, why she had joined the Tamil Tigers, and "the stories of other people – the displaced, the bereaved, the chauvinist, the young – that were being drowned out by the din of the fighting". From 2004, he began making short trips to the island. In 2011, two years after the war's end, he moved to an apartment in Colombo for ten months, arriving "in the spirit of a forensics gumshoe visiting an arson site, to examine the ashes and guess at how the fire caught and spread so cataclysmically, but also to see if any embers remained to ignite the blaze all over again".

In *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan war*, Subramanian emerges as an astute observer with a sharp eye for the hypocritical and the comic in human affairs. He judiciously considers the agencies and events that widened the schisms between the ethnic communities and led to the war: the British emphasized differences and communal identities as part of their divide-and-rule policy; the Sinhalese nationalists voted to make Sinhala the sole official language in 1956, effectively shutting out Tamils from government jobs and requiring even loan applications to be filled out in Sinhala; affirmative action policies in jobs and university admissions favoured the Sinhalese and were seen as discriminatory by the Tamils; the new constitution of 1972 gave Buddhism "the foremost place" among Sri Lanka's faith traditions, formally ending the separation between religion and the state. Though the linguistic and affirmative action policies were later toned down, differences continued to intensify, and discrimination grew against the Tamils, who felt like second-class citizens in their own country. They demanded regional autonomy under a federal state, but this was anathema to the Sinhalese nationalists. With "democratic methods of the Tamil parties floundering", Subramanian writes, the Sinhalese ended up creating a space for the militants.

Subramanian describes the Black July riots of 1983, the official start of the civil war "when the [Tamil] Tigers killed 13 soldiers in an army patrol in Jaffna". In a week-long pogrom reminiscent of Kristallnacht, "Sinhalese mobs visited retribution upon Tamils across the south of the country, killing more than three thousand men, women and children, unhindered – and sometimes even abetted – by the police". President Jayewardene appeared on television to calm the nerves of the Sinhalese but uttered not a word of regret or sympathy for the Tamils. All this further marginalized the moderate Tamil politicians, radicalized the youth, and paved the way for the militant struggle for the independent state of Tamil Eelam.

Wanting to understand more fully the roots of this conflict, Subramanian revisits the island's ancient history and notes how it has been twisted and politicized. He describes how he read the Buddhist chronicle the *Mahavamsa* in a state of delirium when suffering from a

fever. Considering the rise of Sinhalese nationalism in colonial times and characters such as the Buddhist revivalist Anagarika Dharmapala, he finds Sri Lankan Buddhism to be "just as fluid as any other faith, just as easily poured into new and unexpected moulds". Even monks felt no compulsion to refrain from "worldly pursuits and temporal authority". He cites many politicians, radical monks and hotheaded militants to provide a compelling portrait of how the ethnic strife grew and spiralled out of control.

Subramanian has an impressive knack for finding the right people and extracting stories from them. He probes with care and sensitivity, mindful of the risks they are taking in talking to him. There is a description of a Tamil politician who was critical of the Tigers and survived eleven assassination attempts, including one befitting a Tamil gangster film in which he lost his sarong during an escape and ran down a Colombo street in his underwear, "firing his gun back over his shoulders, trying to pick off the guys who are chasing him". Subramanian meets some of the earliest accomplices of the young Velupillai Prabhakaran, the ruthless chief of the Tigers, aka the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They reflect on his charisma, his persuasive powers, his paranoia, and the quirky minutiae of their messy upstart guerrilla operations. They share stories of their hidings, jailbreaks, assassinations, romances and betrayals.

On the Jaffna Peninsula, Subramanian finds an oppressive army presence and checkpoints manned by Sinhalese men who speak no Tamil. During the Tigers' control of the north before 1995, these parts were heavily bombed. When the first low-flying aircraft came, people came out to gawp in wonder, until the planes started dropping bombs. During this time, writes the Tamil historian A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, Sinhalese soldiers committed "atrocities like gang rapes and wholesale plunder . . . and bombed churches, temples, hospitals, and innocent civilians". In those days in Jaffna, a taxi driver tells Subramanian, "I was driving my car more as a hearse than as a taxi". The multi-year blockade of Jaffna caused massive shortages and unemployment, leading many to drift "inevitably, into the Tigers, enlisting to fight or to work in some of the Tigers' own factories, which manufactured weapons and boats". Another painful Jaffna episode Subramanian relates is the ethnic cleansing of 1990. The Tigers, having grown suspicious of the loyalties of Muslims – who had lived as peaceful neighbours, schoolmates and colleagues for centuries – rounded up all 75,000–80,000 of them, looted their belongings, and forcibly expelled them from the peninsula.

Subramanian describes how the Tigers came to love violence and even turned on their own: via extortion, forced recruitments – including

of children as young as thirteen – and the killing of dissenters. He despises their "genius for brutality" and their indiscriminate violence, such as installing landmines (the Sri Lankan army did that too), blowing up buses, and killing monks, pilgrims, women and children. He carefully separates the Tigers themselves from the legitimate grievances of the Tamils. Supported by interviews with ex-Tigers, their spouses and other civilians, his portrait of the pathological culture of the LTTE, along with its transformation over the years down to its bitter end, is a fine achievement.

Subramanian is especially curious about how ordinary Tamils related to the Tigers' violence. He finds a continuum, from those who actively supported them to others who abhorred their ways. The Tigers, Prabhakaran emphasized, were part of a national liberation movement as "freedom fighters, not terrorists". Many Tamils believed the Tigers' claims of acting for their greater good, which, the Tigers said, required some excesses and personal sacrifices in their march towards the Promised Land of Eelam. Besides, who else was fighting for their grievances? With all the bad blood between the two ethnic groups, no compromise seemed possible.

Oddly, Subramanian doesn't investigate the Indian government's role in, as he says, "covertly training and arming the Tigers in the 1980s" – a role similar to that of the US State Department and Pakistan's ISI in the training and arming of the Mujahideen in the 1980s. Nor does he discuss the grave misadventure of the Indian peacekeeping forces that led to Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, or the choppy relationship between India and Sri Lanka over this conflict. Another omission is an exploration of caste in shaping Tamil nationalism and the civilians' experience of war. Prabhakaran came from a low-caste fishing community and despised caste discrimination in Tamil society. He claimed ideological allegiance to secular socialism and promised "total eradication of the caste system" in LTTE pamphlets. His two main rival militant groups in the 1980s, PLOTE and TELO – brutally eliminated by the LTTE – were both peopled by dominant-caste Vellalar Tamils. Did the LTTE play down caste later to expand its support base and attract more funds from the Tamil diaspora for the "greater" cause of Tamil nationalism? Which castes predominated among its middle and upper ranks as well as its "cannon fodder"? The Dutch scholar Joke Schrijvers reported from an earlier phase of the war that a disproportionate number of internal Tamil refugees in camps had lower-caste backgrounds.

Subramanian visits the Vanni region to learn about the last days of the war and genocide. He talks to many survivors. From December 2008, one man says, "the fighting felt more urgent, more frenzied, more one-sided, more final". An estimated 5,000–11,000 Tigers were pitted against 200,000 soldiers in the Sri Lankan army. Within months, hundreds of thousands of civilians had fled from the advancing army into a small coastal area, "carrying whatever they could on their heads or on bicycles". The army surrounded them, blocked entry for food, medicine, journalists and the Red Cross, and began "shelling indiscriminately or specific-

ally targeting civilians. A no-fire zone would be declared, and once people hurried eagerly into its borders, they would be promptly shelled". Makeshift hospitals and a UN compound, a refuge for civilians, were intentionally bombed. Prabhakaran and his loyal bodyguards died fighting. The war of three decades ended in May 2009 with vast numbers of the "limbless and the dying . . . strewn about the stretch of coast".

According to the UN, 40,000 civilians were killed in the final weeks. Many who surrendered were taken away and machine-gunned. Countless were herded into internment camps lined with barbed-wire fencing, where "food, water and sanitation were in sorely short supply". Many died or were killed inside; others reported widespread torture and sexual abuse by soldiers; thousands are still "missing". The government's Orwellian description of this last phase of war was "humanitarian operations".

The civil war is over, but will the Tamils easily forget or forgive the atrocities against them? There is no major reconciliation effort in sight, tens of thousands have been forced off their lands, and there are still 100,000 refugees in India, afraid to return. Tamil areas remain under an oppressive army presence. While many aspects of life are returning to normal, resentments still simmer beneath the surface. Sinhalese pride and triumphalism have meanwhile resurged, with the same sort of chauvinism and hubris that begat the conflict forty years ago. As the Rajapaksa family mafia took control of all major organs of government, economic growth and tourism picked up and the Chinese began investing in the country. But this corrupt and authoritarian regime rebuffed calls to investigate war crimes, brooked no criticism, and sharply curtailed freedom of the press. Disappearances became common. Journalists critical of the regime were harassed, beaten and even killed; many fled the country – Subramanian, himself a journalist, covers their stories with extra attention. Hardline monks, like schoolyard bullies who know that the headteacher won't punish them, turned to persecuting Muslims and Christians. Many Muslim and Hindu religious buildings were torn down and Buddhist ones built in their place, largely to serve as "a taunt, a stamp of Buddhist domination, a permanent reminder of the order of things in Sri Lanka". The new president Maithripala Sirisena, a former political ally of Rajapaksa, leads a coalition of political parties and ran on a platform of anti-corruption and anti-nepotism. Tamil and Muslim voters supported him largely because they consider him less awful than Rajapaksa – Sirisena largely shares his predecessor's stance on Sinhalese nationalism, the army's presence in Tamil areas, and political concessions to the Tamils.

Samanth Subramanian doesn't say whether the embers still remain "to ignite the blaze all over again", but he ends with a note of lament. "Gradually, in my head", he writes, "the boundaries between these slices of time – between wartime and post-war Sri Lanka – melted away. The phrase 'post-war' lost its meaning . . . an unbroken arc of violence stretched from the war right into our midst . . . Having acquired the temperament of a country at war, Sri Lanka had forgotten any other way to live". The powerful human stories in *This Divided Island* – told lucidly and vividly – show what Sri Lankans have won and lost, a prerequisite to any attempt to forge a more inclusive polity for future generations.