SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

Paper Tigers on the Prowl: Rumors, Violence and Agency in the Up-Country of Sri Lanka

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In February 2007, international press reports from Pakistan were filled with accounts of Pakistanis refusing to participate in polio vaccination campaigns coordinated by UNICEF out of fear that the vaccines caused sterilization (see Latif 2007; Walsh 2007). Several local clerics had claimed that the vaccines were actually part of an American-led conspiracy to sterilize Muslims. Similar rumors about vaccinations and sterilization were widespread in Nigeria's Kano state in 2004 (see Associated Press 2004; Walsh 2007), and had also received significant attention in the international press. However, press accounts of these rumors contain little to no explanation for why local leaders in Pakistan and Nigeria spread these rumors, except for accusations of ignorance or general references to anti-Americanism.

I argue that such rumors, and the paranoia and conspiracy theories that coalesce around them, serve local rhetorical political purposes, and often have little to do with public health policies or international affairs. However, rumors are never about just one thing (White 2005:245). Somewhat paradoxically, these rumors are not necessarily evidence of local elites' power and agency, although temporary setbacks to government vaccination programs point otherwise. Instead, I suggest that these rumors actually illustrate the

lack of agency and power among local elites, in the face of more powerful authorities, be it the central government, or international aid agencies, or a new generation of leaders on the horizon. In this essay, I will address the issues of rumors, agency and local elites, not in the contexts of Pakistan or Nigeria, but in another war-torn country, Sri Lanka.

Ever since I began doing ethnographic research in the tea-growing central highlands, or up-country, of Sri Lanka in 1999, local Tamil politicians, union leaders, academics and NGO workers repeatedly told me that if something significant was not done for the development of the up-country, the continued neglect and poverty would almost certainly lead to wide-spread violence. They would often compare the large numbers of over-educated, under-employed youth currently in the up-country tea and rubber plantation areas with similar situations in the 1970s and 80s in the island's South and its North, which gave rise to the violent, militant nationalist *Janatha Vimukti Peramuna* (People's Liberation Front, or JVP) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), respectively (see Hettige 2004; Moore 1990:616; Spencer 2000:125; Tambiah 1986:14). Speakers implied that violent uprisings were an inevitable consequence of Sri Lankan ethnic politics, and that Up-country Tamils would soon have their turn.[1]

However, when I returned to Sri Lanka in 2006 and heard very similar claims, often from the same people who made them years before, I realized that something more than a simple warning or call to action was going on. For example, Narayan, an Up-country Tamil manager of a tea estate, as plantations are called in Sri Lankan English, claimed that the LTTE and other "Northern groups have infiltrated in a large way" into the eight estates under his control in the Dickoya area, although he lacked any first-hand evidence.[2] "Anytime it can erupt," he said, and with "the slightest provocation, it will boil up," since the up-country was "sitting on a powder-keg." He agreed with me that the threat of such violence was not imminent, but repeated that all it would take is one incident, and things could rapidly fall apart.

Narayan said that many estate workers who are parents of relatively over-educated, yet under-employed youth want them to get estate staff jobs for which they are not qualified. "These people are the troublemakers on the estate," he said. "Once this gets to an even bigger number, it will be a great social problem." Increasing education on the estates has often led to increasing frustration, since the promises of a middle-class lifestyle are not easily achievable in the up-country today due to the eth-

nic conflict and the currently unstable Sri Lankan economy. Many children of estate workers do not want the same demeaning and debilitating jobs as their parents, but do not have enough education, contacts or credentials to get higher status positions. Estate youth want jobs outside the estates, not because they have clearly defined career ambitions, but out of a simple desire for something better (Dunham et al. 1997:38).

The vast majority of tea and rubber estate workers and residents in the up-country of Sri Lanka are descendents of Tamil migrants from India, who arrived between the 1830s and the 1930s. These Tamils are officially called "Indian Tamils," to differentiate them from "Sri Lankan Tamils," long resident in the North and East of the island, but they have increasingly come to prefer to identify themselves as "Up-country Tamils," linking them to their current home, and not their ancestral homeland. Up-country Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils share Tamil language and Hindu religion, but are divided on various caste, class, geographical and historical lines. The majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalas, who are primarily Buddhist, and are mainly resident in the South and West of the island. The bloody civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has gone on for about 25 years, though tensions go back to before independence in 1948. Up-country Tamils have mostly been on the margins of the war, though they have been indirectly affected by anti-Tamil discrimination, lack of government services in Tamil, and political neglect of Up-country issues.

Paper Tigers and Population Control

If the up-country has been one step away from exploding for years, then why has no major violence occurred? After the massacre of Sri Lankan Tamil prisoners at Bindunuwewa in October 2000 (see Asian Human Rights Commission 2003), riots spread through the up-country for a few days, but there has not been major violence since then. One possible explanation is that the peace process that began in February 2002 has taken hold, offering new political and economic opportunities, but it has gradually fallen apart over the years, and had almost totally collapsed by 2006. However, violence still occurs in the North and East, despite the cease-fire agreement, and the up-country has received very little of a peace dividend, beyond the dismantling of checkpoints and less official harassment of Tamils. Economic development is still centered along the Sinhala dominated west coast, and has yet to come to the up-country to any great degree.

Additionally, it is still very difficult to access government jobs and services in Tamil, rendering many Tamil Sri Lankans as second-class citizens.

Up-country Tamils' own political and social marginality is at the core of these threats of impending violence. Despite the best efforts of Up-country Tamil leaders, they claim that a violent youth uprising is just around the corner, indicating their own inability to change conditions in the up-country. By rhetorically attributing great potential agency, "the human capacity to act" (Ahearn 2000:12), to Up-country Tamil youth, these leaders mask their own lack of agency. I argue that such threats are motivated mostly by Up-country Tamil leaders' fear of the loss of their own power, either to the next generation, as with youth uprisings, or to the government, as with family planning programs, which I discuss below. These threats of violence are empty political rhetoric to cover up the fact that these Up-country Tamil leaders have been unable to enact sufficient social, economic and political changes in the up-country and that they have been complicit in the various political and economic systems that inhibit such changes. These rumors are thus not "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) nor "tools of resistance" (Turner 1993:xvi). These claims of agency and threats of violence in the up-country of Sri Lanka are signs of a vacuum of agency, rather than indicators of imminent action.

All this rhetoric of potential violence in the up-country was really a paper tiger, or even a paper Tamil Tiger. There was and still is little chance of massive violence occurring in central Sri Lanka. While some social and economic conditions in the Up-country do parallel those that gave rise to the LTTE and JVP (see Tambiah 1986; Wilson 2000), they are not exact parallels. The LTTE and JVP both emerged from situations of "uneven modernity," which " is most starkly manifested in the mismatch between high levels of education and low levels of employment for the educated, but it is also apparent in the generational divide between the educated young and their less-educated mothers and fathers" (Spencer 2000:125). However, such a "narrowly instrumentalist interpretation" does not account for the extreme violence seen in both movements (Spencer 2000:125–126).

The rise of the Tigers and other Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups was preceded by years of separatist rhetoric by mainstream political parties, such as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Though they did not necessarily support violent militancy as a means to achieve their shared goal of a separate state, the TULF did initially condone it, at least implicitly (see Wilson 2000:125). After three major moderate Tamil leaders died in

1977, a new generation of militant, separatist Tamil groups, led by the LTTE, filled the void (Krishna 1999:77). Furthermore, the Tigers had significant support among Tamils in India and the diaspora, providing finances for weaponry and arguments for separatist ideology. Up-country Tamils do not have such outside political support, whether in Sri Lanka, where most Up-country Tamil parties ally themselves with the government, or in India, where their cause is overshadowed by Tiger propaganda, nor access to weapons to sustain a violent uprising.

Up-country Tamils also lack the empowering Marxist nationalist ideology of the JVP, as well as a political structure built over decades, which allowed this Sinhala group to virtually topple the government in the late 1980s, after a failed uprising in 1971 (see Moore 1990). The ideological drive of the JVP was fueled by a sense of resentment among majority Sinhalas that minority Tamils were disproportionately taking advantage of government opportunities in education and employment. Although Up-country Tamils have definitely been discriminated against and denied access to the state, they blame both Sinhalas *and* Sri Lankan Tamils, thus blunting the rise of ethnic nationalism.

In the past, plantation trade unions have been able to contain and channel the frustrations of Up-country Tamil youth, by relying on strikes and other union actions to put pressure on management and government. As estate unions have transformed themselves into political parties in recent decades, strikes have become tools for unions' political goals, rather than ways to better estate workers' working and living conditions, but they remain the unions' prime method to express discontent. Such avenues were not available to Tamil youth in the North in the late 1970s and early 1980s or rural Sinhalas in the far South in the late 1980s, and party politics was effectively closed to their concerns. However, as with those situations that gave rise to the LTTE and JVP, traditional power structures in the up-country, mainly the unions, have become alienated from Up-country Tamils. Union leaders are increasingly seen as corrupt officials more concerned with maintaining power in Colombo than alleviating the problems of their members and constituents in the up-country.

Admittedly, the up-country may witness severe social and economic changes if it does not receive more political attention and economic development, but it will more likely manifest in increased criminal activity or industrial violence and sabotage. Up-country Tamils have lost confidence in the dominant plantation trade unions *cum* political parties, but

alternative leadership structures have yet to be built. Up-country Tamil unions have usually gotten greater benefits from siding with Sinhala-dominated governments, who want to include some Tamils in their administration for international public relations purposes, to show that they are not fundamentally anti-Tamil. Of course, more benefits have gone to the politicians themselves than to the people they represent, but this is not unusual in Sri Lanka's parliamentary democracy. Furthermore, various governments have taken Up-country Tamil political support for granted, offering increasingly smaller incentives for joining governing coalitions, since Up-country Tamil unions do not hide their desire for the perks associated with power in Colombo.

The rhetoric of violence that I heard all over the up-country was simply that: rhetoric—seemingly elaborate and persuasive speech that is fundamentally vacuous. The critical element for this analysis was the source of the rhetoric. I heard threats of potential violence from politicians, union leaders, NGO workers, estate management, and other senior members of the Up-country Tamil community. I do not recall ever hearing a member of the "youth," who would be the ones potentially rebelling, voice any threat of violence. Such threats were only spoken by people who did not see themselves as being part of the violence.

This rhetorical move was a way to let the speaker off the hook, absolving himself (and it was always a male speaker) of any responsibility for future problems, by stating that he has done his best and warned you, but you did not listen and now look what has happened. It is really a call for attention or a not-so-veiled threat to mainstream Sri Lankan society, i.e. urban middle class Sinhalas, that they should not continue to neglect Up-country Tamils. Up-country Tamils have been politically pushing for their rights for decades, and they are using the language of violence as a desperate measure, since previous ways have not worked effectively. In twenty-first century Up-country politics, violence is therefore just a threat, an instrumental, rhetorical way to pressure others to do something and to absolve the speaker of responsibility if nothing is done. "Through rumor, people both concretely *experience* the threat of political violence and *express* their concerns about it" (Kirsch 2002:57, emphasis in original). While the history of violence, harassment and discrimination against all Tamils in Sri Lanka cannot be denied, systematic anti-Tamil violence, especially perpetrated by government forces, has diminished significantly in recent years, except of course in areas of the north and east where the civil war continues.

However, I heard other rhetorical threats from Up-country Tamil leaders that were not about violence *by* Up-country Tamils aimed at other communities, but of others' violence *against* Up-country Tamils. During numerous interviews with Up-country Tamil politicians, activists and NGO workers, I heard discussions of the pernicious birth control programs allegedly initiated by the government, estate management and a quasi-governmental organization, the Plantation Human Development Trust (hereafter referred to as "the Trust"). I had heard similar complaints before but dismissed them as paranoid fears about medical issues that were not the primary focus of my research. However, after repeatedly hearing such claims when I returned to Sri Lanka in 2006, and questioning the speakers, I came to realize that this was a complementary example of the political rhetoric of violence. While many Up-country Tamils sincerely believed these claims, they also served a political purpose, to show that Up-country Tamils were still under threat from the government and other institutions, the very same people whose help they had requested in claiming youth violence was possible.

On the one hand, these Up-country Tamil leaders say that if the government does not do anything, then there will be violence, for which which they cannot be blamed. On the other hand, they also say that you cannot trust the government since it is fundamentally anti-Tamil and engaging in nefarious birth control policies to limit the size of the Up-country Tamil population and thus decrease its power and rightful place in Sri Lankan society. These claims all add up to a rationale for the continued misery of the up-country that absolves the speaker of any responsibility. Just as they had used the threat of violence *from* Up-country Tamils as a political tool, these leaders use the threat of violence *to* Up-country Tamils as a political tool to show that the community remains under threat. Both of these rumors link the fate of the Up-country Tamil community to the fate of individual Tamil bodies (see Turner 1993:3).

While the first is a rhetorical move to absolve themselves of responsibility since they gave a warning, the second threat is also a way to abdicate responsibility by blaming the pervasive anti-Tamil policies of hegemonic institutions in the Up-country, chiefly the government, estate management, and the Trust. For example, a recent NGO report on human security in the up-country stated that "forced sterilization with political motivation has become a major issue in the estate sector. The [Up-country Tamil] community believes that this type of family-planning system is a tool aimed at reducing the [Up-country Tamil] population" (Foundation

for Co-Existence 2005:28). Up-country Tamil leaders cite family planning as an example of the extreme bias, even "genocide" according to some, that many Sri Lankans continue to hold against Up-country Tamils. It is as if they say, "How can you expect me to change anything when I am up against forces like this?" Such paranoid threats and conspiracy theories are not invoked as part of a reasoned argument about the future of Up-country Tamils, but are cynically employed to show that change is extremely difficult and near impossible.

Up-country Tamils regularly claimed that the Trust was enforcing a coercive policy of birth control. Many African-American women raised similar concerns in the early 1990s after the introduction of the contraceptive Norplant (Turner 1993:221–224). Rumors about sterilization are thus expressions of ethnic anxiety about Up-country Tamils' place in modern Sri Lanka (see Feldman-Savelsberg et al. 2000:172). For example, a 2002 report by the Sri Lanka Monitor (2002), a European NGO, stated that the largest trade union and political party in the up-country, "the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) has expressed concern…that sterilization and family planning programmes for tea and rubber workers will result in a drastic decline of the Tamil population." However, this concern is rather self-serving, related more to political power than the well being of Up-country Tamils, as the following quote illustrates. "The CWC alleges that government institutions and some NGOs have deliberately intensified programmes in the last thirty years in an effort to bring down the Tamil population thereby reducing Tamil representation in Parliament" (Sri Lanka Monitor 2002). The union's primary worry is their own power in parliament, not the well-being of the people they supposedly represent, indicating how these threats are used as a smoke-screen for political concerns.

Such beliefs have significant precedent in South Asia, though. During the first decades of the twentieth century, when family planning programs and policies were first introduced in South Asia, justifications for birth control were often tied into the eugenics movement and neo-Malthusian fears of over-population (see Anandhi 2000; Ramusack 1989). Elites tended to advocate birth control for the masses as a way to alleviate poverty and disease, and to limit the numbers of poor people, who are seen as incapable of self-discipline and self-control (see Anandhi 2000:144). Unfortunately, the views of the poor in Sri Lanka and India about family planning at this time were not recorded for posterity. Perhaps some appreciated these efforts, but many probably did not, since education was usually not a cen-

tral concern at this time. Such a pattern of elite advocacy of birth control and skepticism by the poor populations who are targets of family planning programs had their apotheosis in South Asia during the Emergency in India. During Emergency rule from June 1975 to January 1977, Indira Gandhi pushed a severe policy of forced sterilization in India (see Gwatkin 1979; Vicziany 1982, 1983; Ledbetter 1984). This shameful legacy shrouds all family planning efforts in South Asia today, even in Sri Lanka, where news and rumors of the Emergency are well known.

However, the situation in the up-country of Sri Lanka is not as simple as these short examples from India suggest. Especially in multi-ethnic societies like Sri Lanka, several levels of elites are operating, often at cross-purposes. In general, national elites in the Sri Lankan government, based in Colombo, are usually Sinhalas, and tend to advocate for family planning programs in the estates. Though few will explicitly voice neo-Malthusian views, the patronizing view that they are saving these poor Tamils from themselves continues implicitly. However, local Up-country Tamil elites are often vocal opponents of family planning, seeing them as Sinhala attempts to reduce the Tamil population. What usually gets lost in these debates, though, are the desires of Up-country Tamil women.

One major problem about these repeated rumors of aggressive birth control policies in the up-country was that I heard them from men only. I never once heard an Up-country Tamil woman complain about birth control. In general, they tend to want birth control, though not always the methods and timings desired by government representatives. Granted, the vast majority of community leaders are male, but I became suspicious about the lack of female voices in this debate. A continued male bias against birth control persists in the up-country, since it gives women significant power and control over reproduction. While Tamil women have always had some say in reproductive choices, the public presentation is often one of male control over all sexual matters, although birth control is generally seen as a woman's responsibility. As Karin Kapadia (1995:168) remarks, for low-caste Tamils, "the responsibility for successful contraception lay with women; men did not need to be careful." Up-country Tamil male fears that a vasectomy would lead to a loss of "manliness," such as the ability to work hard or perform sexually, puts pressure on Up-country Tamil women to undergo sterilization (Jayaweera 1991:201; Palaniappan 2003:17).

In addition, dominant Tamil social norms dictate that sexual matters should not be discussed outside of the household, and Trust birth control

efforts are seen as betraying this trust. Admittedly, Tamil gender practices led me to talk to men much more than women, and Up-country Tamil women would likely be reluctant to talk about such personal matters with a male stranger, such as myself. But the lack of women's words on this issue, despite their vocal discussion of other political matters, highlights the extent that these views were based more on rumor and hearsay than first-hand evidence.

Up-country leaders' paranoia about family planning assumes coercion, since they automatically suspect government, estate management and the Trust. Such sentiments are understandable and somewhat justified, based on previous experiences of anti-Tamil prejudice and discrimination. Since Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the central government has successfully reduced the Tamil population when they deprived Up-country Tamils of citizenship in 1949 and forcibly repatriated over one-third of the community to India between 1967 and 1983. Furthermore, the continued ethnic conflict since 1983 has provided sufficient incentive for Tamil migration from Sri Lanka to Canada, the Gulf states, Singapore, Europe, and elsewhere, although this has been more common among Sri Lankan Tamils than Up-country Tamils. The Sinhala-dominated government has already successfully reduced the island's Tamil population, and family planning programs are seen as the *coup de grace*. Similar to African-American rumors of continued Ku Klux Klan influence and power (see Turner 1993), these past experiences of over-powering state sponsored or condoned violence lead Tamils to assume that such threats continue, despite evidence to the contrary.

Although these collective memories of past discriminatory actions should not be discounted, they do not necessarily make up part of a vast anti-Tamil conspiracy. However, inter-group conflict such as inter-ethnic conflicts in modern Sri Lanka foster anxiety about the motives of powerful groups regarding the bodies of disempowered minority communities (see Turner 1993:23). In a similar way, female sexuality and maternal status have been over-emphasized in nationalist discourse in India (see Anandhi 2000:151; Chatterjee 1993:130). When discussing birth control and potential uprisings with Up-country Tamils, I continually asked for concrete first-hand evidence, which was far from coming. Both of these threats of violence, one from the community and the other to the community, persist through rumors and hearsay, which are seen as more reliable sources (see White 2000:31). There is little documented evidence for Tiger infiltration

or militant violence in the up-country nor for a government-supported plan to use family planning to limit the up-country Tamil population.

However, for conspiracy theories, such as these, this kind of proof is not really necessary, and contrary evidence would not necessarily convince someone otherwise (see Keeley 1999:120). Rumors do conform to standards of evidence, and do not seem false to believers (White 2005:241). A few incidents, often inflated through the rumor mill, are cited to damn the entire system. Due to a lack of reliable verification, these rumors persist, since these truth claims "make sense" in the context of collective memories (Feldman-Savelsberg et al. 2005:141). As is the case in Papua, Indonesia (see Butt 2005:418–419), Sri Lanka's recent shameful history of anti-Tamil violence and discrimination gives plausibility to these rumors, as well as fertile ground for their continued propagation. However, rumors are not necessarily concerned with the facts or truth of events and actions, but the motivations behind them. Conspiracy theories explain why things happened, not how, marshalling all available evidence to support a unified theory of agency, action and motivation (see Keeley 1999:116, 119).

Up-country leaders strategically use rumors not necessarily to empower the people, since these rumors "frequently reflect the inchoate disaffection of citizens, diverting allegiance, but lacking any positive program for change" (Fine 2005:5). Thus, Up-country Tamil leaders further rumors to mask their own ability to make changes, and to limit everyday Up-country Tamils own desire and ability to affect change. Rumors of violence are used to spur action in others, particularly the government, while simultaneously covering the speaker, absolving him of responsibility for future events. In this article, I do not directly address the potential sources of these rumors, nor the conditions that facilitate these rumors and why they are believed (see Feldman-Savelsberg et al. 2000). Instead, I follow Luise White (2000:18) and Gary Fine and Irfan Khawaja (2005:199) by being concerned with the political uses and consequences of these rumors.

Conspiracies of Control

For example, Pradeep, a teacher on an estate school and a leftist activist, claimed that on some tea estates, 100% of the Tamil women were sterilized. Although the government says that only 44% of fertile women on estates have been sterilized, according to Pradeep, "actually 90% in Nuwara Eliya district," where most Up-country Tamils live, are sterilized.

"They want to change the ethnic balance of the Up-country" he said, without clarifying exactly who "they" were. It was not clear to me whether he was blaming the government, estate management, and/or the Trust. Granted, for many Up-country Tamils these institutions seem to operate in concert with each other and they were loosely unified from the early 1970s until the early 1990s when the government owned and ran the estates. These institutions are blamed, both as abstractions and as concrete local embodiments (Butt 2005:425). However, his use of an unnamed "they" reveals the extent which his claims rest on shaky ground and depend on a conspiratorial view of society and politics (see Tuner 1993:108–109).

Pradeep then stated that "they" performed sterilization operations in muster sheds, the open air buildings where estate workers assemble for their daily work assignments each morning, without any medical equipment or anesthetics. After being challenged on this, Pradeep admitted that he did not know the names of the tea estates where this allegedly took place. In reality, all medical procedures are performed either in the estate clinic or in a hospital in a nearby town. While many estate clinics' hygiene and sanitation are questionable, birth control operations have always been performed inside, in private settings. But the key issue is why would he believe and tell these rumors about open-air sterilizations? As Luise White (2000:144) argues for vampire rumors in East Africa, medical technology in the up-country raises anxieties not because they are imperfectly understood or assimilated, but because they expose other kinds of relationships.

Although the operations were not really held in public, they are seen as shameful for the entire community, as if they were done in public. Many Up-country Tamils regard the mere presence of government-sponsored family planning programs as an inappropriate exterior, public display of interior, private sexuality. Additionally, these practices feed into an already established sense of insecurity and alienation from the government. Pradeep assumed that the government, estate management and the Trust are up to no good, and readily believed any otherwise seemingly preposterous story otherwise. The government has engaged in systematic anti-Tamil violence in the past, and many Up-country Tamils assume that these prejudicial practices continue in the twenty-first century.

I challenged Pradeep by asking whether some Up-country Tamil women would want to stop having children. He argued that women are influenced by the plantation system and are "indirectly advised," i.e. that Up-country Tamil women are pressured into doing this. His views start on the assump-

tion that Sri Lankan officials are anti-Tamil, and that family planning is another arm of this effort. It does not allow for the possibility of any benevolence or even indifference on the part of official Sri Lanka, nor any choice or agency on the part of Up-country Tamil women. Persistent prejudice persists in Sri Lanka, but this usually leads to inadequate resources or neglect, rather than conscious strategies against Tamils. "Why are they stressing the people?" Pradeep concluded, "They should let us be free." The only problem seems to be figuring out who "they" are.

Despite these claims, even Pradeep, who is one of the most militant Up-country Tamils I have ever met, was skeptical about potential links with the Tigers. He felt that Up-country Tamils may try to politically link up with the LTTE, but practically it will not materialize since "there are major factors that divide us," such as language and history.[3] However, "if the government does not understand [Up-country] Tamils and the LTTE does, they may gain ground." "If they don't solve the problems of unemployed youth in the plantations, we will have an uprising," Pradeep argued, "If there is no alternative, we will go and fight. If we are pushed, we'll have to fight." Again, violence is not the fault of Up-country Tamils, but something that will result from the lack of any other choice or from being provoked by Sinhalas. He felt that there is "no better way to teach a lesson to Southern rulers" than violence. Several times he repeated, "The people have a historical need to fight." However, this need has never really been fully realized.

Up-country Tamils have tended to be only indirectly involved in the ethnic violence that Sri Lanka has endured for over the past twenty-five years, though they were a direct party and target in the past, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Periodically, though, Up-country Tamils have been directly involved with the island's ethnic violence, most prominently in 1956, 1977 and 1983. While Up-country Tamils have usually not been the subject of Sinhala chauvinist anti-Tamil political rhetoric, especially since the Sri Lankan and Indian governments came to an agreement about repatriation in 1964, they are easy targets for anti-Tamil pogroms, since they are poor and physically isolated.

Interestingly, the most intense violence directed at Up-country Tamils has occurred not on the estates, but among those Up-country Tamils who left the estates to settle in nearby villages and towns (Peiris 1991:179). Urban Up-country Tamils were not only the most accessible targets, but also were actively countering hegemonic desires to keep them in their

place of the plantations. This not only limited the occupational and residential mobility of Up-country Tamils, but also led to an increased migration to heavily Tamil areas of the up-country for safety and security. Since the massive island-wide anti-Tamil violence of July 1983, direct anti-Tamil violence has decreased in the Up-country. It tends to continue only in remote or marginal areas, but there have not been major incidents in recent years, although political rhetoric of violence continues unabated.

The Politics of Paranoia

Manikam has been a member of the Nuwara Eliya Municipal Council, the local government body for the largest urban center in the up-country, since 1992. Partway through a more than two-hour conversation with him in his suburban home, he brought up family planning. Like Pradeep, Manikam made certain assumptions about choice and agency that granted much more of both these qualities to government and medical authorities than to Tamil estate workers. Manikam felt that the "main purpose" of the Trust is family planning, since "Sinhalas don't like Up-country Tamil numbers going up." "Most Trust money goes to family planning" he said, although the official data does not support this. Manikam, like many Up-country Tamils, held a deep suspicion about family planning, usually seen as simply contraception and not as concerted efforts to ensure that all children receive adequate support from their families. Such misperceptions have been exacerbated by the Trust's own inadequate public education efforts. However, debates over family planning cannot be reduced to discussions solely about birth control, which silences issues of women's autonomy and agency (Anandhi 2000:139).

Manikam felt that the Trust was convincing Up-country Tamil women to undergo family planning through duplicitous and coercive methods. He cited a stereotypical example to illustrate his point. After marriage, an Up-country Tamil woman usually goes to her new husband's house and estate and does not normally know anyone at her new residence. The estate midwife will come and meet the new woman, and ask her about her period, pregnancy and other personal health matters. The woman will take the midwife into confidence, since she does not know anyone on the estate besides her in-laws. The next step, he claimed, is that the midwife then discourages the couple from producing any more children, and so the "family planning is not their own." He sees it not as an informed choice, but decep-

tion by the Trust and their operatives to gain confidence with women, damage their minds and then convince them that it was their own idea.

His interpretation of this stereotypical process helps illustrate differing senses of agency among Up-country Tamils, especially women. I assume that Up-country Tamils are not total dupes and have significant agency to change their lives, even if they have little to no education. Admittedly, some Up-country Tamil women may be convinced of family planning, and some medical staff may be over-zealous and even unethical in their drive to make quotas, but that does not necessarily mean that Up-country Tamils do not make their own decisions. Manikam assumed that Up-country Tamil women cannot be trusted to have their own best interests in mind when making choices, especially medical decisions regarding family planning. However, a 1990 study of female estate workers in Nuwara Eliya district found that Up-country Tamil "women were keen to limit their families," since more children would interfere with their work schedule and would be harder to manage and look after (Samarasinghe, Kiribamune and Jayatilake 1990:38).

The Trust claims that all estate medical staff are properly trained; but this does not mean that they are properly using their training. R. Turner (1990:154) has found that "grass-roots family planning workers" in Sri Lanka, like their counterparts in India, China, the Philippines and Vietnam, lack thorough knowledge of family planning methods and tend to offer their clients a limited number of choices. Additionally, most midwives in the estate sector lack the proper qualifications for the position, unlike those in urban and rural areas. Furthermore, "most of the midwives in the estate sector are Sinhala-speaking, leading to communication difficulties for Tamil women." (Foundation for Co-Existence 2005:28). Thus many pregnant Up-country Tamil women prefer lay midwives, since they share language, traditions and residence (Gajanayake et al. 1991:799).

If forced participation in family planning really was a major problem, the best way to deal with it would be to educate Up-country Tamils to resist or counter-act Trust practices. However, nothing like this is done on the estates. These claims only serve a rhetorical purpose, and the actual lives and choices of Up-country Tamil women become a secondary issue. This rhetoric does not seriously entertain the idea that Up-country Tamil women might not want any more children, misogynistically assuming no female agency. As Gowry Palaniappan (2003:11) points out, "The issue here is how much women on plantations undergo sterilization based on their own deci-

sion. At present, the reasons could be attributed to ignorance, vulnerability, male chauvinism, inclination to the money given for sterilization, etc. However it is an issue that needs more thorough investigation."

To what extent undergoing sterilization is forced or choice is very difficult, even impossible, to determine, since it can vary from case to case, but it does not mean that it is part of a government plan to limit the numbers of Up-country Tamils. The root of the matter is that management and the Trust are neglecting counseling and underestimating their clients. Up-country Tamil women are able to make clear choices between temporary and permanent methods of birth control. However, according to Sobanadevi Rajendran, of the Department of Economics and Statistics at the University of Peradeniya, they "do not have the freedom to select methods" under the current system. As Vidyamali Samarasinghe (1993:142) argues, "it is evident that [Up-country] Tamil plantation women desire to limit their families" and usually the only way that they know is to undergo sterilization. However, many Tamil women may intentionally choose sterilization since it is not reversible, thereby blunting any pressure from their relatives, especially mothers-in-law, to have more children, and also gaining the status of senior women (Säävälä 1999:294, 297).

The main difference between family planning on the predominately Tamil estates and on the predominately Sinhala villages, according to Rajendran, is that in the villages they have "good counseling" in which officials "will explain all the methods" and how to select among them, detailing the advantages and disadvantages of each. In the estates, on the other hand, the Trust and estate medical staff "neglect counseling." They "just check the number" of children, and suggest a birth control method. If a woman has two or more children, then the officials push for permanent methods. The key factor is the relationship between medical staff and clients, which is a "not good relation" on the estates due to the lack of counseling. Differential access to resources and the quality of those medical resources, and not any cultural or ethnic differences, are the major factor in differential use of contraception across ethnic lines in Sri Lanka (Ramakrishna Murthy and de Vos 1984:230), a situation that has only been exacerbated by the continuing ethnic conflict.

Furthermore, the medical infrastructure is different on the estates, where it is a part of the work environment, so that pressure may be indirectly built into the system. Free medical care, along with free housing, is provided to all tea plantation workers, though the quality of the housing

and health care is usually sub-standard. On the estate, the Estate Medical Assistant (EMA, who is actually the chief medical officer) and midwife, both in positions of authority linked to the employer, are the ones pushing family planning, and not just the village doctor or midwife. This increases the possibility for coercion, even if it is not done consciously. Estate workers may feel that they have to do whatever the estate staff says, with little question, or else they will suffer the consequences.

However, when I asked Rajendran if she had found any evidence of women being forced to undergo permanent methods of birth control, she replied, "According to my point of view, I cannot say forced, but there are indirect incentives." For example, if an Up-country Tamil woman refuses a permanent method, she may not receive benefits from management, such as new housing, a new roof or other home improvement. For example, "in many estate clinics, midwives threaten the women who have multiple pregnancies with loss of employment" (Foundation for Co-Existence 2005:28). Most Up-country Tamil women are afraid to refuse pressure from the estate medical staff, out of real or perceived threats from management. Unlike in the conspiracies presented to me, any pressure exerted is indirect and not necessarily conscious.

Basically, Up-country Tamil women are not giving fully informed consent. This is partly because medical officials feel that estate women will not understand the options, in a patronizing view of them as lacking agency, but also partly because it is easier to avoid giving them the required counseling. It is not planned genocide, as Pradeep argued, but the cumulative result of prejudice, discrimination, ignorance and neglect. Like the rumors of sterilization associated with vaccination in Cameroon discussed by Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg et al. (2000:163), medical officials were more concerned with "practical efficiency rather than communication and persuasion," easily fostering miscommunication and rumors.

Like Pradeep, Manikam linked the threat to the community of family planning and the threat from the community of potential violence, by claiming that the Sri Lankan government feared an uprising among Up-country Tamils and therefore wanted to reduce the population of the Up-country. Both threats, I argue, are empty, with little chance of coming to fruition. Localized instances of violence of this sort in the Up-country occasionally occur, either from over-enthusiastic midwifes or a division of estate workers upset at management, but sustained Up-country-wide violence has not occurred in recent years. Politicians and other leaders employ such

claims as part of Sri Lanka's violent ethnic political rhetoric to channel Up-country Tamil anger, energy and resentment toward their cause, rather than encourage actual violence. These threats are used to mobilize the community to action, in response to government discrimination, and to mobilize the government to action, in response to community anger.

A Matter of Trust

In 2003, the Trust changed its name and its mission, from the Plantation Housing and Social Welfare Trust to the Plantation Human Development Trust. Mr. I. S. C. Bandara, the regional director for Hatton, stated, "When we started, housing was the most important thing for workers," bringing them out of dilapidated line rooms. The Trust received funding from European countries, especially Norway and the Netherlands, to focus on infrastructure development, such as housing, dispensaries, maternity wards, water supply and sanitation. The end of those funds in 2003 necessitated a change in mission and thus also a change of name. This does not mean that all infrastructure issues on the estates have been solved, although the Trust has made significant progress. Now all of the Trust's funding is from the Sri Lankan government and the various plantation companies, and they now concentrate on family planning, health care, child care and cooperative societies. As Bandara joked, their focus has shifted from the hardware to the software on the estates. This was solely because of a change in funds, and not part of any over-arching plan for development in the plantation sector.

The Plantation Housing and Social Welfare Trust was formed in 1993 as a quasi-governmental organization when nearly all Sri Lankan tea and rubber estates were privatized. The Trust is a private organization, but not really an independent NGO, since it is the privatized arm of previously government-run estate welfare programs. Bandara boasted that the Trust featured the best of both government and non-governmental organizations. However, its closeness to the government and estate management has limited its effectiveness, especially since most Up-country Tamils see it as an extension of the government. As Manikam argued, "Who is the director? A planter. The planter does not want to give anything to the worker." The Trust directors, including Bandara, have always been former estate managers, or planters, and this reveals the limitations and failings of the Trust. While having a former estate manager at the helm does lit-

tle to increase the Trust's credibility among Up-country Tamils, it indicates how the Trust is intertwined with estate management, and does development work in the estates to help the profitable running of the estates, more than helping people, as its primary goal.

Before the tea estates were nationalized in the early 1970s, family planning programs on the estates were provided through the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (Vidyasagara 2001:34). When the Trust took over in January 1993, the estate sector had the highest percentage of sterilization in the island, at 44%, as well as the highest percentage of induced abortions, 38.8%, indicating the stress on permanent rather than temporary methods of birth control (Vidyasagara 2001:34). This continues earlier practices, as Dennis McGilvray (1982:66) noted in 1982 that "it is my impression that the politically disenfranchised [Up-country] Tamil tea pickers have received the most effective vasectomy programme in the island."

According to Rajendran, of the University of Peradeniya, over 80% of Up-country Tamil women are not happy with their birth control experiences. Family planning implementers, like the Trust, "say it is 100% successful. But if you go [talk to women], they are not happy; they feel cheated by the permanent method." Family planning authorities neglect to take folk notions of fertility (see McGilvray 1982; Nichter and Nichter 1987) and traditional methods of fertility control (see Caldwell et al. 1987; Gajanayake and Caldwell 1990) into account, thus limiting their programs' effectiveness. Family planning and birth control are a significant problem on the estates, but it is a problem of lack of freedom of choice and informed consent. It is not that the Trust or management is maliciously trying to decrease the Tamil population, but through neglect and prejudice, they have allowed these problems to develop.

When I asked Bandara about the Trust's family planning programs, he immediately got defensive about the conspiracy theories. He started by noting the high number of maternal deaths and malnourished mothers on the estates before the Trust was established (see Samarasinghe, Kiribamune and Jayatilake 1990). The Trust has significantly brought down maternal mortality, infant mortality and low birth weight rates on the estates, although these numbers had already been decreasing since the early 1980s (see Puvanarajan 2002:37).

Bandara somewhat diplomatically noted that family planning "is a subject for discussion" among Up-country Tamil NGOs, politicians and others, who level accusations and "point fingers at the Trust." "I have nothing to

hide," he continued, "Now people are empowered. You can't hoodwink the people." He felt that Up-country Tamil activists and politicians were the ones doing the hoodwinking, while they of course feel that it is the Trust who is the deceptive party. Either way, both views imply that Up-country Tamils themselves have little agency in health matters and are being overly influenced by others. Bandara argued that it was "very easy to sell this type of story" since the director of the Trust is a Sinhala, but "people are not gullible now." He said that at a meeting with Up-country NGO leaders, he went around the room and asked how many children the NGO representatives had, and all had just one or two. He felt it was patronizing for them to not allow the same family planning choices for estate workers, who are assumed to be incapable of such decisions.

Bandara then asked me not to write down his next comments, and so I put my pen on the table in plain sight.[4] He claimed that incest was rampant on the estates. The whole family will be sleeping in a small room, he continued. Estate line rooms are often only three meters per side, but whether this tight space leads to incest is questionable. If the father rolls over one side it is his wife, Bandara said, and if he rolls over to the other side, it is his daughter or daughter-in-law. He claimed that NGOs will not discuss incest, but he felt that it was a huge problem on the estates. This is why the Trust is giving Up-country Tamils single family housing units, with multiple bedrooms, to have some privacy and separation within the family.

A similar argument for detached housing, rather than traditional line rooms, was made by the Sri Lankan Minister of Labour Relations and Foreign Employment, at a public launch ceremony for International Tea Day in Colombo in February 2006. He was much cruder in his remarks, but similarly suggested that Up-country Tamils were regularly engaging in incest and that having houses with multiple rooms would remedy the situation. Such an argument is incredibly derogatory and demeaning, implying that it is only poor Up-country Tamils who engage in such behavior, which Sinhalas are somehow above, and that improved housing is needed mainly to save Up-country Tamils from themselves, or at least save Up-country Tamil women from their older male relatives, rather than any notion of pride and dignity in home ownership. This all points to Sri Lankan elites' continued patronizing view of Up-country Tamils, held even by those supposedly working for their development. Officials may talk of empowerment, but their words often betray themselves to reveal their anti-Tamil prejudices.

Although I was initially prone to trust Bandara's data and assertions, his increasing tenacity and paranoia about incest made me suspect his comments as much as those of similarly obsessive Up-country Tamil activists. His comments reinforce that these debates are not just about family planning, but are political arguments about agency and power in the up-country. The paranoid conspirators, like Pradeep and Manikam, are correct that the Trust and other authorities are pushing sterilization and not properly educating Up-country Tamils, but it is also correct that the Trust encourages temporary methods and runs programs for Up-country Tamils that are the same as those for Sinhala villagers. The problem is how these policies are put into practice. The Trust may mean well, but in reality, they do not live up to their ideals. However, this is more often due to neglect than any conscious plan to eliminate Up-country Tamils.

Crying Wolf

Since Sri Lanka's civil war began in 1983, Up-country Tamils have not faced as much direct violence as Sri Lankan Tamils of the North and East of the island, but they have experienced enormous indirect violence, through discrimination, harassment and neglect. Up-country concerns are not on the national political agenda, ensuring continued poor health services and incomplete education, facilitating rumor and hearsay on the one hand, and empty threats of violence on the other. While recent decades have brought significant improvement and development to the Up-country, particularly in education, it still lags far behind the rest of the island, especially in terms of health care. Limited official concern for the up-country, coupled with inefficient and corrupt Up-country Tamil politicians has allowed rumor, paranoia and conspiracy to take up more and more space.

Talk of pernicious family planning leading to genocide is much more politically attractive and simpler than countering decades of complex networks of neglect and discrimination. Up-country Tamil leaders find it easier to motivate Tamils citing rumors of active anti-Tamil conspiracies, rather than passive negligence. Such conspiracy theories are appealing since they employ all available data and information into a unified explanation based on an ordered universe (Keeley 1999:118–123). Rumors thus fill gaps in official data and information (Feldman-Savelsberg et al. 2000:168) and reconcile inconsistencies in official discourse (Butt 2005:421). Despite all the seeming problems these rumors present, many

Up-country Tamils would rather believe that the government is continually trying to repress them, rather than the depressing reality that most government officials simply do not care or think much about them.

Just as these threats of violence are ultimately empty, so too are threats of violence from the community. Rumors about a Tamil Tiger presence in the Up-country have persisted for decades, but the only Tigers present are paper tigers. Up-Country Tamils, who are often on the receiving end of anti-Tamil violence, discrimination and harassment, sympathize with the LTTE's desire for freedom and justice for Tamils, but they tend not to support its separatist goals and few are ready to take up arms over it. Up-country Tamils overwhelmingly reject LTTE claims to speak for all Tamils in Sri Lanka, even while many Sinhalas see every Tamil as a Tiger. For example, all estate managers whom I talked to were paranoid about possible LTTE activities on their estates, but none could provide any evidence that such infiltration has occurred. Such a view is seriously exacerbated by their being Sinhalas, who are not attuned to discrimination against Tamils and are vulnerable to nationalist biases in the Sinhala press. Additionally, Up-country Tamils may disguise workplace sabotage as terrorist activities as a way to diffuse responsibility, create fear and prevent the possibility of reprisals.

While it is logical to assume that Up-country Tamils would be more likely to take up violence over concerns close to home, it is highly unlikely to happen anytime soon. Recent decades have witnessed an increase in identification as Up-country Tamil, but this ethnic feeling and attachments to the up-country do not necessarily translate to violent or separatist political action. If any link between Up-country Tamils and the Tigers is established, it will most likely be in the political sphere, as the recent contact between the *Malaiyaka Makkal Munnani* (Up-country People's Front), the second-largest party in the Up-country, and the Tigers indicates. However, such an alliance is more of an attempt to form a pan-Tamil bulwark in reaction to increasing political power of Sinhala nationalist parties, such as the JVP and the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (National Heritage Party), than Up-country Tamil support for Tamil militant separatism.

Both threats that I have discussed depend on a peculiar view of Up-country Tamil agency that is internally contradictory. The threat of violence from the community allows Up-country Tamils, especially the youth, a great deal of agency, so much so that the speaker is practically powerless to stop them. Metaphors of pots ready to boil over or a bomb about to explode

indicate the allegedly precarious nature of the situation, but also the great power to act that the youth of today are seen to possess. The threat of violence to the community, however, assumes little agency among Up-country Tamils, especially female estate workers. The over-arching assumption is that Up-country Tamil women have been coerced into accepting family planning by duplicitous authorities. The idea that women might want to limit the number of their children or increase the time between pregnancies never enters the discussion, nor that they might have some degree of choice in the matter. Agency is granted to the educated, urban, youth who are assumed to be male, while it is not seen as a factor among estate women, who are assumed to be uneducated. While educated urban youth definitely have greater access to official Sri Lanka, estate women have always had significant agency to make changes in their own lives.

Such threats of violence seem to be the only way to get grievances heard and addressed in contemporary Sri Lanka. Up-Country Tamil ethnic identity has been forged in the social and political contexts of decades of ethnic violence, which has compelled them to confront their uncertain status as Tamils in an increasingly Sinhala-dominated Sri Lanka. The continuation of the ethnic conflict has forced Up-country Tamils to express their identification with Sri Lanka in opposition to Sinhala nationalists' equating being Sri Lankan with being Sinhala and to militant Tamil separatists' view of the mutual exclusivity of being Tamil and being Sri Lankan.

However, both threats reflect political rhetoric more than political reality, although in politics, sometimes rhetoric is reality. One assumes no agency on Up-country Tamils' part and the other gives them total agency, although absolving the speaker of responsibility for it. Both political threats rely on Up-country Tamils having no choice, either coerced by the Trust, management and the government, in the case of family planning, or by ethnic forces beyond their control, in the case of a militant uprising. Either way, they have no option but to react violently. Up-country Tamils are thus seen as lacking agency by the politicians, union officials and NGO workers who supposedly represent them. They use threats to motivate the community to act, to show that Up-country Tamils still face discrimination and are in danger from more powerful ethnic groups, and to show to Sinhalas and Sri Lankan Tamils that Up-country Tamils could be a danger to them. But threats become empty when repeated without any significant changes. They will no longer motivate action to counter these threats. However, they are not necessarily meant to do so, but to

allow the speakers to continue to monopolize agency and authority. Such rhetoric does not empower the people, but highlights the insurmountable tasks ahead of Up-country Tamils. Crying wolf over paper tigers does little for Up-country Tamils themselves, though such rhetoric of violence does a lot for the Up-country Tamil leaders mired in this menagerie.

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ENDNOTES

[1]I was not immune from such predictions either (see Bass 2004:262).

[2]All names in this article are pseudonyms, except for public figures, including politicians and academics.

[3]Historically, the LTTE has rarely had a significant presence in the up-country, though more Marxist Tamil nationalist groups, such as the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS) and People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), tried to recruit Up-country Tamils in the 1970s and 1980s, but these efforts did not meet with any significant success.

[4]I therefore do not have direct quotes from his remarks. However, after a few minutes he did not seem to mind or notice that I picked up my pen again and started taking notes.

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