Possessed of great natural wealth and endowed by the traditions of all Eastern races with fabulous treasures, Ceylon was bound to be the prey of the invader.

(E.B. Denham, 1911)

Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island which was essentially peopled by migrants and conquerors who came from the sea. All the names of the island which are known today, from Taprobane to Ceylon, were given by these visitors. The people who were later called Sinhalese, Tamils, Indians, Muslims, Moors, Europeans, Malays, or Chinese all came at a historical period when the main religions were already constituted, urbanization was in process and writing had been invented. This extra-territorial origin explains perhaps the past need to regularly rename the island and the modern need to assert belonging through myths and legends.

Human presence in Sri Lanka goes back to prehistorical times. The most ancient traces are dated back to the Lower Palaeolithic. But nationalism rarely looked towards palaeontology to legitimize the community’s will to exist as a nation. In the Sinhalese nationalism of the early twentieth century which laid the foundation for the present nation state, the peopling of the island was a fine weave made of myths, orientalist writings, and popular perceptions as well as histories. In this
imagined past where the self was being shaped, the migrant occupied an important place. The question of who is a migrant took a new turn with the change in the political landscape which followed the granting of universal franchise in 1931. The definition of the migrant by the political elite was then tied to the question of entitlement (what are your rights?) and what constituted the contours of a ‘Ceylonese’ identity. The mid-1930s, a period of economic depression in the country, witnessed popular acts of hostility towards migrants. The limited nature of these acts shows, however, the importance of the state in monitoring violence. Under a regime of law and order communalism was not permitted to break out into violence.

At different times the boundaries between migrant and indigenous people shifted. This chapter will show how the definition of the migrant changed from the early twentieth century when all ‘non-Aryans’ were considered alien by proponents of Sinhala nationalism to a more complex definition of the ‘other’ founded on scientific and enumerative criteria—such as residency period or proof of intention to settle—in consonance with the rational and legal order that was implanted in colonial Ceylon. There the identities pitted one against the other by the political elites were ‘Ceylonese’ and alien. This chapter will show how both myths and the apparatus of knowledge of the West combining to inscribe boundaries between communities and dividing them into ‘migrants’ and ‘sons of the soil’ led to politics of exclusion and violence against the former.

**Migrants in foundation myths of the Sinhalese**

The Sinhalese and Tamils trace their origins to Indian settlers of the island. Other ethnic communities in Sri Lanka are the ‘Indian Tamils’, Muslims or ‘Moors’ and small numbers of Eurasians, Malays and Europeans. ‘Indian Tamils’ are descendants of people who migrated from India in the nineteenth century as plantation fieldhands, urban labourers and merchants.

The place of India in the articulation of nationalism in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries underwent significant changes during this period. Discontinuity was the norm. At times India was the non-West and looked upon as the mother country by Sinhalese and minorities alike united in their moderate and secular opposition to British rule. At others when cultural symbols were more prominent, and nationalism was the preserve of the Sinhalese community, pride of place was given to north India. All those who came later from south India were considered aliens.