



## Lesson Plan: A Dissection of Ethnic Conflict

**FILM:** This lesson plan is designed to be used in conjunction with the film *No More Tears Sister: An Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal*. This 52-minute film recreates the struggles of human rights activist Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, who remained in her war-torn homeland of Sri Lanka to expose human rights violations and to provide whatever level of stability that she could.

**Note:** This film contains a few graphic images of people killed during the conflict in Sri Lanka. Please preview before classroom use.

P.O.V. documentaries can be taped off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, P.O.V. offers a lending library of DVD's and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE! Go to [www.pbs.org/pov/classroom.php](http://www.pbs.org/pov/classroom.php) for more details.

### OBJECTIVES:

In this lesson, students will:

- Critically analyze texts to determine the characteristics of their author.
- Watch a video clip related to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.
- Locate Sri Lanka on a map.
- Identify and explain factors that contributed to ethnic tensions and conflicts in Sri Lanka.
- Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the war in Sri Lanka with another conflict previously studied.

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-12

**SUBJECT AREAS:** Social Studies, World History, Human Rights, Current Events.

### MATERIALS:

- Handout: Who Wrote These Letters?
- Handout: History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka
- Method (varies by school) of showing the class video clips from the P.O.V. Web site for *No More Tears Sister*, or have a copy of the film and a VHS/DVD player and monitor.

**ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED:** 1-2 class periods

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka can be an interesting point of comparison with other revolutionary movements and ethnic/racial clashes that your class may study.

Independent since 1948, Sri Lanka is an island nation south of India slightly larger than the State of West Virginia. Its population of just over 18,000,000 is nearly three-quarters Sinhalese, with approximately 6.3% Sri Lankan Tamils, 4.9% Indian Tamils, and Moors, Malays, and Burghers (of Portuguese and Dutch descent) comprising the rest. Most Sri Lankans are Buddhist (74.2%), while 9.3 % are Hindu, 9.4% Muslim, and 7.5% Christian.

The “History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka” handout for this lesson provides a timeline and summary of the country’s ethnic struggles. For more details, please visit the Web sites listed in the [Resources](#) section of this lesson plan.

## **ACTIVITY:**

1. Distribute the handout, “Who Wrote the Letters?” and give students five minutes or so to complete it.
2. Ask several students to share their descriptions of the person who wrote the letters. Have them identify clues in the text that informed their thinking. On the board, capture student ideas to create a more complete profile of the letters’ author.
3. Explain that the letters were written by a woman named Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a mother, anatomy professor and human rights activist. She stayed with her young daughters in her homeland of Sri Lanka during years of brutal conflict, and was assassinated in 1989. Show students the [two-minute trailer](#) from the film, *No More Tears Sister*, to hear her sister and daughter describe the last day she was alive.
4. Help students locate Sri Lanka on a world map. Tell them that Sri Lanka used to be called “Ceylon,” and that after 500 years of colonization by the Portugese, Dutch, and British (show where the colonizing countries are located), it gained its independence in 1948. Tell students that approximately 75% of the population in Sri Lanka is Sinhalese, and a large minority (about 18%) is Tamil. Explain that ethnic tensions between these groups led to a brutal civil war. Rajani’s family believes that Rajani, a Tamil, was gunned down by members of the Tamil Tigers movement who were angered by her attempts to expose their violations of human rights.
5. Pass out the handout, “History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka.” Ask students to work in pairs to review the timeline on the handout and use a highlighter pen or other marking method to identify factors in Sri Lanka that contributed to ethnic tensions and led to civil war.

6. Have each pair report one of their findings to the class and explain how that factor played a role in the country's struggles.
7. Connect the lesson's discussion to previous learning by drawing a Venn diagram on the board and then comparing and contrasting the war in Sri Lanka with another conflict (e.g., revolutionary movements, ethnic clashes) that students have studied. What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis?

**ASSESSMENT:**

- Evaluate student profiles of Rajani written after they considered clues in her letters.
- Provide students with a map of Asia and have them color in Sri Lanka.
- Have students list 2-3 factors that have contributed to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Do the same for another conflict that students have studied. Ask students to compare and contrast these in paragraph form.

**WORKSHEETS / HANDOUTS**

- Who Wrote These Letters?
- History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka

## Who Wrote These Letters?

**Directions:** As you read the following letters, circle clues in the text that reveal the type of person that the author might be. When you finish reading, use the back of your paper to write a description of the person who wrote the letters based on the clues you found in the text.

### 3.17.87

[...] I would feel so depressed if in my young age- I had not stood with my people especially in this hour of immense suffering- that I had lied to my spirit, to the spirit of my people, to the millions of oppressed people. Maybe it looks grandiose- the betrayed- but that's how I would feel- that I have chosen comfort and love, the fulfillment of my own desires- to that of their suffering. [...]

### 3.28.87

So the bombing is coming closer and closer we can feel and hear the bombers right next to us as we sit in the trenches. Narmi and Shari are terrified as any children. But they are very grownup because of the events around them. [...] Stand on your feet. Do not depend on another for anything tangible.

### 3.30.87

In the early hours of the morning yesterday I was reading when I heard a thunder rushing close by- I grabbed my sleeping little ones and ran and tumbled into the trench. The whole family sat it out- bombs over and over again right round us, trees in our garden were shaking with terror and vibrating. [...] Darling, darling at the end all of us like termites crawled out of the trench, talk to neighbor, count the corpses and carry on.

### 11.25.87

Our university is a rubble...Of course they have ransacked my room totally- gone through each and every file and letters, all my specimens have been jumbled up [...] I am living in the darkest days of my nation ...The immense sacrifice of the people is nothing. It is so upside down our world- that you do not know where to start to organize. One needs enormous energies to restart, lose, restart, lose, restart, lose- Oh God an endless cycle. [...] They came again to interrogate us at home [...] I think we will be under surveillance. [...] I think that I am going to get killed, by the poisonous emotions outside me. [...]

### 11.29.87

[...] Normalcy returning is an absolute dream. Nothing works here. Research is an utmost unreachable pleasure- as nothing can be done- we have no water, no electricity in the university. No staff can come to work as rigorous curfew- numerous check points. And military actions all the time. No transport as well and the Tigers are ready to kill even starving people trying to get some rations. Nothing is salvageable- even a legend that we had, a romantic dream of freedom- because it (...) is tainted with egoism, cruelty and murder.

## History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka

**1948** – After 500 years of colonization by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then named) became an independent nation.

**1948/49** – The new government passed anti-Tamil legislation. The **Ceylon Citizenship Act** denied citizenship to Tamils of Indian origin (roughly 800,000 indentured laborers brought by the British from South India to work on rubber, tea and coffee estates when the majority Sinhalese refused to work on foreign-owned plantations). The Tamils had been looked down upon not only by the Sinhalese, but also by the minority indigenous Tamils (who had been overrepresented in the Christian elite of administrators and clerks that the British had developed to run the country). The **Ceylon Amendment Act** disenfranchised plantation Tamils, dropping the proportion of Tamils with voting power in the new legislature.

**1950s** – The country's ethnic and religious conflicts escalated as competition for wealth and work intensified in the newly independent country. The Sinhalese, who felt resentful of their place under the British, wanted to reassert their culture, language, schools and Buddhist religion.

**1956 – Sinhala Only Official Languages Act** passed, making Sinhalese the national language and effectively reserving the best jobs for the Sinhalese. This "Sinhala only" law was partly designed to address the imbalance of power between the majority Sinhalese and the English-speaking, Christian-educated elite. When the bill was introduced, Tamil political leaders were attacked in a four-day riot that left more than 100 Tamils dead. The law limited education and work opportunities for many Tamil youth. As a result, the *Tamil Hindu* minority started to push for a federal system of government with greater autonomy in the mainly Tamil areas in the north and east.

**1957 – BC Pact** was signed to protect Tamil interests with a regional autonomy package. Brokered between Sinhala Prime Minister Bandaranaike and the Tamil leader Chelvanayakam, the pact was broken under pressure from Sinhalese ultranationalist extremists (who were, themselves, encouraged by Buddhist fundamentalist clergy). In 1959, Bandaranaike (the "B" of the "BC Pact") was assassinated by a Buddhist monk.

**1958** – Anti-Tamil riots broke out when Tamils were driven away from the South.

**1971** – Worsening economic conditions set the stage for deep class divisions among the Sinhalese and an anti-government insurrection. Tens of thousands of educated, unemployed Sinhalese young adults had joined the JVP (People's Liberation Army). In 1971, they took up arms against the government. The Sri Lankan army responded by killing over 25,000 youth. Rajani's future husband, Dayapala, is arrested, tortured and sent to solitary confinement during this period.

**1972** – Ceylon was officially renamed the Republic of Sri Lanka. The constitution formally made Buddhism the country's primary religion. Tamil places at university were cut back—subsequent civil unrest resulted in a state of emergency in Tamil areas, with Sinhalese security forces imposing many discriminatory laws. As a result, a large number of militant Tamil groups emerged.

**1975** – LTTE (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), known as the Tamil Tigers, was formed to fight for an independent Tamil state. At the end of the 1970s, the government instituted the draconian **Prevention of Terrorism Act** and under its authority arrested thousands of Tamil youth.

**1983** – The Tamil Tigers ambushed an army convoy killing 13 Sinhalese. News of fallen Sinhalese soldiers set off an anti-Tamil rampage in Colombo and elsewhere. Mobs of Sinhalese viciously killed thousands of Tamils and destroyed property in pogrom-like attacks. The army and elected officials did nothing to stop it. More than 2,500 people were killed. In the ensuing ethnic crisis, half a million Tamils left the country to seek refuge in India and elsewhere.

**1986** – The government retaliated against the Tamil militants, who had been receiving arms and training from India. In April 1987 the government mounted Operation Liberation, the carpet bombing of the north and east part of the country. The government responded to criticism for countless cases of torture and disappearances by arguing that they had to defend themselves against the militants. The armed separatist Tigers emerged supreme among Tamil liberation movements by eliminating all other groups, violently when needed.

**1987** – India and Sri Lanka signed an accord to bring an end to the conflict. An Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was sent to the island to end the hostilities and supervise surrender of arms by the Tamil militants while diplomats attempted to negotiate a ceasefire. Instead, another conflict broke out, this time between the peacekeepers and the Tigers.

**1987/88** – Rajani and a few close colleagues formed the **University Teachers for Human Rights** (UTHR) to document human-rights violations by all sides in the conflict. They compiled their detailed witnessing of atrocities in their manuscript “The Broken Palmyra.”

**1987/89** – In the south of the country there was a second JVP insurrection. In what has been described as a three-year reign of terror, many left-wing activists were targeted by government killing squads and the JVP ultra-nationalist groups, leaving an estimated 60,000 dead or missing.

**September 21, 1989** – Rajani was gunned down, just months after the LTTE had entered into a deal with the Sri Lankan government and declared a ceasefire.

**1990** – The Indian Peace Keeping Forces left. The ceasefire broke down and all-out war erupted between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers. Thousands of women and child soldiers were “recruited” by the LTTE, which fought 235,000 government forces to a stalemate. The Tigers emerged as one of the world’s most feared and effective paramilitary organizations.

**2002** – A formal, but fragile ceasefire between the government and the Tamil Tigers was brokered by Norway.

**2003** – Ongoing peace talks broke down.

**2004** – The December tsunami interrupted the downward spiral of government-LTTE relations, but only temporarily.

[Source: National Film Board of Canada]

### Current Situation

In February 2006 both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government addressed the escalating violence by reaffirming their commitment to the 2002 ceasefire during talks in Geneva, but the LTTE pulled out of the second round of talks when there was a dispute over the safety of their transportation. In April 2006, the Sri Lankan government blamed the LTTE for a suicide-bomber attack on its army headquarters in Colombo, which badly injured the head of the army. In return, the government launched a two-day air strike against the rebels. The LTTE has not admitted to carrying out the suicide-bomber attack nor to assassinating Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgama last August, but have been blamed for both incidents. As of May 2006, nearly 64,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka, and 1 million displaced.

The United States has classified the LTTE as a terrorist group predominantly responsible for the violence and sees the Sri Lankan government as a cooperative partner in the U.S. war against terrorism. The U.S. acknowledges that the Sri Lankan government has deployed troops across the country solely for counter-insurgency purposes.

[Source: BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk>]

## EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS:

- Have students watch the full 52-minute film and identify the protest strategies used by Dr. Rajani Thiranagama during her lifetime (e.g., student strikes, supporting militaristic revolutionary activities, international education campaigns about the atrocities in her country, documenting social injustices, refusing to leave her hometown or walk away from her university responsibilities). Ask students to describe how her thinking about resistance changed over time. Discuss what influences shaped her ideas along the way. Do students agree or disagree with her eventual belief that armed struggle can only lead to the abuse of people's rights? Have students justify their answers.
- Despite the great dangers of resisting the Tamil Tiger movement, Rajani founded the group, University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR), and worked diligently to expose human rights violations. Conduct a brainstorming session to define human rights. Compare student ideas with the U.N. Declaration of Universal Human Rights ([www.un.org/Overview/rights.html](http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)). Show the class a 90-second video clip where Rajani describes some of her human rights activism in a letter to her sister Nirmala. (Begins at 38:53 with, "Dear Nirmala, I'm sending the following excerpts..." and ends at 40:20 with, "...did not want to escape from that.") Have students then read about current activities by the UTHR and react to their efforts in writing.
- Explain that traditional culture in Sri Lanka included a system of castes, where each person is born into a particular group that defines his or her unchangeable position within society. Show students the 45-second video clip where Rajani's sister Nirmala tells the story of how her parents mistreated the woman who came to pound rice in their home. (Begins at 3:14 with, "As young girls, one figure..." and ends at 4:02 with, "These were complemented by the books we read.") Discuss the impact of growing up in a culture that accepts discrimination as normal. Point out that even as young girls, Rajani and Nirmala knew that discrimination was wrong and discussed it with their parents in an effort to stop it. Ask students if they have ever witnessed or experienced discrimination. How did they respond?
- Discuss how different people have reacted to the trauma and loss in Sri Lanka. Rajani wanted to do all she could to keep society running. Show students a 4-minute video clip to illustrate her response. (Begins at 31:11 with, "Rajani's break with the Tigers..." and ends at 34:54 with, "...exactly one of these women.") Next, find out how members of Rajani's family cope with trauma and loss in the Film Update on the P.O.V. Web site. Finally, watch FRONTLINE/World's slide show ([www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/srilanka/slideshow.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/srilanka/slideshow.html)) featuring a group of artists who paint protest art at the sites of suicide bomber attacks to honor the fallen. In what ways do students cope with difficult circumstances?
- What have been the experiences of women during the war in Sri Lanka (e.g., victims of war, militant fighters, peace builders)? How do their experiences compare and contrast with those of men in that country? Have students similarly evaluate the roles that men and women have played during conflicts in other countries studied by the class.

## RESOURCES:

For additional resources related to Sri Lanka, please see the [Delve Deeper](#) reading list for this film.

### Atlas: Sri Lanka

[www.infoplease.com/atlas/country/srilanka.html](http://www.infoplease.com/atlas/country/srilanka.html)

This Web site features maps of Sri Lanka, Asia, and the world, plus an in-depth profile of Sri Lanka's history, government, economy, and people.

### FRONTLINE/World: Sri Lanka: Living with Terror

[www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/srilanka/](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/srilanka/)

This Web site features an interview with a member of the University Teachers For Human Rights organization (founded by Dr. Rajani Thirangama), Tamil Tiger methods for developing suicide bombers, passages from a fictional account of the country's civil war, and a slide show that illustrates how a group of artists protest the violent conflict in Sri Lanka.

### Library of Congress: History of Sri Lanka

[www.loc.gov/rr/international/asian/srilanka/resources/srilanka-history.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/international/asian/srilanka/resources/srilanka-history.html)

This selection of Web sites from Library of Congress subject experts includes in-depth timeline information, specifics on government leaders over time, details on the country's people and ethnic groups, and more.

## STANDARDS:

### Behavioral Studies

Standard 4: Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions.

- Level IV, Benchmark 1: Understands that conflict between people or groups may arise from competition over ideas, resources, power, and/or status.

### Geography

Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

- Level IV, Benchmark 4: Knows the role culture plays in incidents of cooperation and conflict in the present-day world (e.g., conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s, Central Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, states within the former Soviet Union in the 1990s; cooperation such as the religious and linguistic ties between Spain and parts of Latin America; ethnic ties among the Kurds living in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey)

### Language Arts

Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

- Level IV, Benchmark 1: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

- Level IV, Benchmark 2: Uses a variety of criteria (e.g., clarity, accuracy, effectiveness, bias, relevance of facts) to evaluate informational media (e.g., web sites, documentaries, news programs)

## **World History**

Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world.

- Level IV, Benchmark 6: Understands the role of ethnicity, cultural identity, and religious beliefs in shaping economic and political conflicts across the globe (e.g., why terrorist movements have proliferated and the extent of their impact on politics and society in various countries; the tensions and contradictions between globalizing trends of the world economy and assertions of traditional cultural identity and distinctiveness, including the challenges to the role of religion in contemporary society; the meaning of jihad and other Islamic beliefs that are relevant to military activity, how these compare to the Geneva Accords, and how such laws and principles apply to terrorist acts)

[Source: "Content Knowledge" (<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>) by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning)]