

OLD HABITS DIE HARD: NATIONHOOD IN THE AFTERMATH OF TSUNAMI

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The disaster of December 26, 04, popularly known as the Tsunami, created the largest impact a natural disaster has come to create in Sri Lanka in the recent past, changing the geography and the demography of the country in a matter of hours. An attempt to interpret such a tragedy in its aftermath had to contend with two key dynamics around which the stories of Tsunami were woven. Namely, the cause – not the immediate scientific cause but the cosmological reason – and its impact in relation to who was affected for what reason and thereby who deserves to be helped. While entertaining cosmological reasoning for the Tsunami, which saw Sri Lanka's two main political parties as catalysts, I leave out these accounts to concentrate on the the impact of the Tsunami as experienced and expressed by individual people. I interpret the explanations of tsunamis in the context of post-war Sri Lanka, attempting to focus on the impact of the Tsunami on the Sri Lankan nationalist consciousness, from information gathered through personal accounts and conversations I have overheard at public places.

The devastation that touched almost the entire coastline of Sri Lanka seems to have carried a "lesson." As the President herself stated over the national television, it was the time to learn the lesson that we are all equal. Nature, in its harsh way, has taught that all are. This was accompanied by calls for unity, as "unitedly" we would "brave the devastation" that "has befallen the nation." It was taken for granted that sentiments stated above were resonant of the feelings of the populace of Sri Lanka, with all television stations calling for Sri Lankans to forget their differences and unite for the cause of re-building the nation, of holding out the begging bowl. The extent to which this natural disaster has altered the nationalist consciousness of Sri Lankans seems to remain a question that needs further exploration, as in more private contexts, the impact of Tsunami seems to intensify the division, rather than the opposite.

I saw Sinhala consciousness making itself felt when I heard a person, almost a tourist to tsunami-hit Hikkaduwa even though he was a Southerner, state as he witnessed the damage, "a bomb couldn't cause the same damage." He was distant and removed from both contexts he commented on, as he himself admitted, but built the link between himself and the disaster-struck people through his identification as a Sinhala from the South. His comment on the tragedy in Hikkaduwa had two implications. On one hand, he down-played the death and destruction caused by the two-decade long war in the North and the East as being of minor scale compared to the devastation the Tsunami caused in the South. On the other, his comment claimed a status of extreme helplessness to the South,

thus urging and justifying intense concentration of aid to the area. Many Sri Lankans of the South identified, alternatively, Matara, Hambantota, Galle to be the worst hit areas, even when statistics spoke to the contrary. Thus, claiming the prestigious position of being "worst-hit" for the South can be read as an attempt to channel funds to the South, or rather, to prevent it from being directed to the remote North and East. It could be argued that the Southern Sri Lankan found it easier to grasp the devastation caused by the Tsunami in the familiar Southern terrain, as the images of destruction facilitated their gauging of devastation. For instance, many who witnessed the devastation the tsunami had left behind were keen on describing the exact damage, in which area, to what landmark etc. The damage caused to "New Monis," a landmark popular among local tourists to the South, is one such example upon which such stories about "worst-hit South" were built. Media too aided the building of the discourse of "worst-hit South," especially immediately after the Tsunami, through repeated and tasteless telecasts of images such as the famous "Galle Clip," which was rumored to have been pivotal in bringing in aid to the country. Such concentration on the South along with accompanying stories strengthened or colored the Sinhala interpretation of the impact of the Tsunami.

On the other hand, some who visited the areas struck by the Tsunami, were relatives and friends from the same areas, who wanted to witness with their own eyes the fate that had befallen the South. Such witnessing "with your own eyes" was vital to comprehend the disaster that befell on "people who lived like us," as I overheard one such visitor say to another. Thus, the disaster seemed to have strengthened the bond of the Sinhala, as the need arose among those who were not affected to identify with those who were affected by the tsunami, building a protective net to protect Sinhala against potential threat of being marginalized in relief and reconstruction efforts. The experience of refugee status adds to this bond. The large number of people who were left displaced by the disaster brought to the South a new experience of that of refugees. The South was used to seeing the IDPs of the two decade long war as a distant reality. As far as the South was concerned, refugees, along with homelessness, were experiences exclusive to the North and the East. Refugee category of borne out of Tsunami left Sinhala people awe-struck, as they come to terms with falling into the status of refugee. It is with disbelief that the Southern Sinhala displaced people stated "we *too* are now refugees because of the Tsunami."

The focus of the Sinhala South on the damage to the LTTE leadership by the Tsunami could be read in a nationalist vein. Immediately after the news of disaster striking Muthur reached the South, people of the south tried to gauge the damage to the LTTE, particularly to the leadership and its military strength. These were given validity when media displayed similar interest in the issue, with stories of the death of LTTE leaders. The interest shown in the South in the possible damage the tsunami caused the LTTE was similar to that Sinhala people demonstrated after a major battle. The Sinhala South was keen to know the damage in assessing the extent to which the LTTE would have been militarily weakened by the Tsunami. An underlying theme of the Tsunami's impact on the LTTE was to point out that even nature was against the unjust cause of the LTTE. Nature's scheme against the unjust LTTE is highlighted by stories of incredible survival rate of Buddha statues and statues of gods and goddesses, now belonging to the Buddhist pantheon, in certain instances. The incredulity with which people of the South, mostly Buddhists I presume, spoke of the survival rate of Buddha statues, and those of Gods and Goddesses occasionally, brought forth the sentiment that nature did not rise against Buddhism. This assertion resonated the anti-Christian sentiment implying that nature's wrath was not directed against Buddhism. These people overlooked the survival of other statues in disaster struck areas, among there were statues of Jesus Christ, Mother Mary and many of politicians and other important people.

Tamil nationalist response to the Tsunami seemed to regard the consequences of the disaster of a lower scale compared to those of the two-decade long war. That was what was implied when a Tamil nationalist stated that the consequences of the Tsunami were not as great as that of the 1995 displacement of Jaffna. In the context of massive displacement, deaths and disaster in the South as well as North and East as the result of the tsunami and the large scale response the State and other concerned agents of society, the statement simply implied that the country was not aware of the suffering that the people of the North and East have been through. In other words, his point was that adequate attention was not paid to the sufferings and destruction caused by the war to the lives and property of the war-affected areas.

As a concluding note, it could be said that the entrenched roots of Sinhala and Tamil were such that a natural disaster that treated "all equally" would not result in bringing the divided communities together, despite the unity that was propounded by many almost as a cliché. The tsunami did open a space, in which the adversaries could co-operate politically. There were many individual instances of coming together of divided communities to help each other. However, traditional mutual suspicion colored the sentiment of the key communities, and was fuelled greatly by many of the media institutions both overtly and through unprofessional conduct due to ignorance. ■

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