

# EDUCATING FOR PEACE A TAMIL PERSPECTIVE

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In the current climate of heightened tension and open hostilities, the need to develop a new initiative in educating for peace is very apparent. Its aim must be to create a climate of thought within which political leaders will be spurred on to work for the resolution of conflict between warring parties through non-military means. It must also be a climate conducive to foster reconciliation between estranged communities, so that Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims can once again live together as neighbours and friends—as they have done for centuries. Indeed, in the present atmosphere in which killing is so routinized, it is no longer adequate to educate toward the goal of avoidance of conflict or warfare. What Sri Lanka needs in this hour of crisis is a new and certainly a more inclusive vision of humanity, which could offer a basis for positive peace making. Parents, teachers, journalists and community leaders have much to contribute to this process.

Peace making on the other hand cannot expect to gain ground, without also struggling against the prevailing, and indeed popular ideology of 'us' against 'them', that is, the collective notions of identifying 'us' Tamils as against all 'those' non-Tamils and 'us' Sinhalese as against all 'those' non-Sinhalese. This ideology continues to inflame the distinctions between the peoples of Sri Lanka, which frequently manifests itself in the 'politics of hatred' and the 'politics of purity', the twin expressions of identity politics.<sup>1</sup> The popularity of this ideology is to be explained by the fact that its proponents use age old materials, for example, the *Puranas* and the *Mahavamsa*, in new ways. Therefore, to be effective in dealing with this ideology, educators for peace must be able to identify these sources and also the channels through which the ideas are transmitted.

Here I give a Tamil example of how the ideology that underlies the 'politics of purity' and the 'politics of hatred' is fashioned, by the use of old and new materials, making it a potent weapon wielded by communalists.

## Images of 'them' from Ancient Puranas

In a recent work Rajmohan Ramanathapillai has shown how puranic and epic symbols of the past

continue to operate intimately within Sri Lankan Tamil society, motivating people, shaping their conduct and instilling a sense of dharma; consequently giving meaning to social and political actions.<sup>2</sup> One of the strongest ideas which the puranas and the epic convey is the notion that evil doers will ultimately be destroyed by good people, even with the aid of violence. This dominant idea found in the stories, has been disseminated widely through school text books, newspapers and cinema, as well as through ritual enactments (*curan pur ceremony*), recitations (*kathapirasangam*) and theatrical performances (*natakam, nattu kuttu, villu pattu*).<sup>3</sup>

The Tamil puranic view of the fate of evil-doers was based on the earlier Gupta Puranas, composed by brahmins. The Gupta Puranas portray a world in decline due to the corrupting and heretical nature of the Kali Age. In these works we would find sharp and contemptuous denunciations of the heretics (*nastikas*) and the barbarians (*mlecchas*), followed by a confident assertion that they would all be exterminated at the end of the Kali Age, when Dharma would again be restored. This theme was borrowed and popularised by the authors of the Tamil puranas during their disputations with the Jains and the Buddhists, from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries A.D. We would at this time find the terms 'heretic' and 'barbarian' being used in a sense that is familiar to us today.

First, in the atmosphere of emotional, bhakti religiosity, heresy was very much in the eye of the beholder. Once the early heretics, the Buddhists and the Jains had largely disappeared from the Tamil scene, we would find that to the Saivites the Vaisnavites became heretics, and vice versa. As Wendy O'Flaherty has observed, from the sixth century onwards, "Hindus came to use the term 'heretic' as a useful swear word to indicate any one who disagreed with them, much as the late senator Joseph McCarthy used the term "Communist".<sup>4</sup> In the current politically charged atmosphere, the same emotional approach to dealing with heretics is being re-enacted in the Tamil politics of denunciation. Anyone who politically disagrees is turned into a heretic: he or she would be condemned as a **Thesa thurohi** (betrayal of a nation), and be subject to either banishment or extermination.

Secondly, from the tenth century onwards when the caste system had become fully developed in the Tamil country,

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anyone who did not observe the *muraikal* (the rules), was regarded as ritually impure, an uncivilised barbarian who deserved social exclusion. In following this medieval puranic distinction between the civilised and the barbarian, the Jaffna Tamils, as Bryan Pfaffenberger has shown, regard the veddahs and anyone whose lifestyle resemble theirs, such as the nalavars and the pallars, as *kattumirantik* (barbarians), "deemed to be not only low caste but also thoroughly evil and dangerous (*kettavarkal*, bad people), possessing a propensity to create disorder."<sup>5</sup>

When these vellarlar-brahman standards of civility are pressed a little further, the Sinhalese, Tamil speaking Muslims and Batticaloa Tamils could also become classed as barbarians. Such a development is only to be anticipated. From a Jaffna Tamil point of view:

Sinhala people appear to be very easily angered and potentially violent, a character trait that, in Tamil ethnophysiology, is thought to stem from a lack of sexual and ritual diligence. What is more, Jaffna Tamils believe very firmly that the other Tamil speaking groups of the island — the Tamil-speaking Muslims, the so-called Indian Tamils of the central highlands, and the East Coast Tamils — are also less diligent than Jaffna Tamils in keeping up the ancient ways, and on this account Jaffna folk rank them lower and refuse to marry them.<sup>6</sup>

It would indeed be surprising if such a powerful concept does not enter into the current political discourse. When, for instance, Jaffna Tamils refer to the EPRLF, an East Coast based militant group, as *Eelattu pallar*, they are in fact saying that "those" people are barbarians, *kettavarkal* (bad people), and dangerous, and not to be politically trusted. The term clearly has powerful religious, social and political connotations. It is this perception that led to, and justified, the savage attacks on them in Jaffna, in December, 1986; when a large number of them were killed and the rest expelled from the peninsula.

### Images of 'us': from Modern Historiography

While the *Puranas* have been useful in defining "those" non-Tamils, modern historiography, since the publication of Rasanayagam's *Ancient Jaffna* in 1926, has served to define "us" Tamils, by presenting a separate and distinct past, often in conflict with the Sinhalese past.<sup>7</sup> Rasanayagam, through selective use of available data, tried "to prove that not only was Sri Lanka's Tamil history the history of Jaffna, but that practically the whole history of the island was Tamil-hindu or Dravidian history, or at least widely influenced by Tamil history."<sup>8</sup>

Also, by connecting the Aryacakravarti rulers of the Jaffna Kingdom to brahmins, he bestowed Tamil ancestry with a sacred and prestigious origin.<sup>9</sup>

Padmnathan's claims were more modest. In the Kingdom of Jaffna (1978) he too, presents a Tamil Hindu past, although it is a version of the Tamil past that is separate from the Sinhalese Buddhist past, and from this premise, he made an important claim that "the Hindu tradition, along with the Tamil language, forms the bases of Tamil identity".<sup>10</sup> This same image of "us" was propagated more vigorously by Satyendra: to be a Tamil is to speak Tamil, and to be a Saivite; which for him is echoed in the saying, "*Thamilum Saivanum, Saivanum, Thamilum*".<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to avoid the feeling that Tamil nationalist historiography has in so many ways been directly influenced by Sinhala Buddhist nationalist writings and speeches, where it is frequently affirmed that Sri Lanka is *Dhammadipa* and *Sihadipa*, the alleged historical bases of Sinhalese identity. On the other hand there are definite limits to such influences. The Tamils have no written document along the lines of the *Mahavamsa* to authenticate their singular and separate historical identity, and therefore, the Tamils are in one sense, free to choose and to present many versions of their past.

So far, however, the history of Sri Lankan Tamils has been written from a Jaffna *vellalar* perspective which authenticates their distinctive values and the prestige of their institutions. The independent traditions of the *mukkuvar*, *vanniyar*, *karaiyar* and the *veddhas* has been either excluded or made subordinate to the *vellalar* history.

### Educating for Peaceful Co-existence and Co-operation

We have noted how historical and mythical materials are currently being used to construct stereotypes of "us" and "them", a distinction which offers a basis for the politics of purity and the politics of hatred. Identity politics in turn is reordering Sri Lanka's pluralistic cultural landscape, and in consequence reinforcing these homogenous stereotypes.

Despite these ominous trends, educators for peace can take encouragement from the fact that heterogeneity and not homogeneity is the characteristic expression of Sri Lanka's many traditions. As such they continue to serve us as models of co-operation and co-existence. Take for instance the *Rajarata* civilisation<sup>12</sup>, where many of Sri Lanka's traditions did at one time intersect, presenting us with a significant model of co-operation and co-existence. *Rajarata* civilisation embraced most of the dry zone, an agricultural zone comprising the capital province, centered



around Anuradhapura (and later Polonnaruwa), and several more or less autonomous outer principalities over which the centre exercised symbolic or ritual overlordship. This sort of highly decentralised state is typical of many contemporary states in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> As a result it was able to accommodate a variety of peoples; Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims and also the unforgettable veddhas, who would have no difficulty in retaining their corporate identities and lifestyles, while also actively co-operating with others to create a common civilisation.

For many Tamils, the *Rajarata* example simply reiterates the obvious: that there have always been strong pluralistic elements within the Tamil speaking people. In Tamil Nadu, where most Tamil speaking people live, religion and territory have never been considered essential components of the Tamil identity. In part because Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Muslims and Dravida-atheists in addition to the majority Hindus, have made substantial contributions to the development of the Tamil tradition.

The best known example is the Tamil literary tradition, which developed over a period of two thousand years through the collective efforts of all these groups of people. Here is a sample of their works.<sup>14</sup>

- (i) *Tirukkural* (100-400 A.D.): The most celebrated Tamil ethical work. The author, Tiruvalluvar is probably a Jain, since the work reflects Jain moral code and its theology.
- (ii) *Manimekalai* (200-550 A.D.): A well known Buddhist epic. The heroine Manimekalai preaches the Buddhist ideal of serving all living beings with detachment.
- (iii) *Cilappatikaram* (200-450 A.D.): An account of the rise of Kannaki-Pattini cult, which is popular throughout Sri Lanka, particularly in the East Coast.
- (iv) *Tempavani* (1720 A.D.): An epic dealing with the legendary life of St Joseph. The author, Beschi, a Jesuit priest, is known to the Tamils as Viramamunivar.
- (v) *Cirappuranam* (1715 A.D.): The author, Umarupulavar gives an account of Prophet Muhammad's life in a Tamil setting. Regarded as the basic text for Tamil Muslim religious life in Sri Lanka.
- (vi) *Iratcaniya Yattirirkam* (1882 A.D.): A Tamil adaptation of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written by Krishna Pillai.

This literary evidence shows that the Tamil tradition, when taken as a whole, remains a powerful witness to the

multiculturalism that has always been the hallmark of the Tamil heritage. The educators' task is to make this tradition of co-operation and co-existence more explicit and obvious to all Sri Lankans, by exploring creative methods of expressing those models, and in consequence to challenge those who are in actual fact inventing a monocultural tradition which never existed.

## Notes

1. Edward W. Said, 'The Politics of Modernity and Identity' *The Bertrand Russell Peace Lectures* no.2, McMaster University, December 4 1992.
2. R. Ramanathapillai, *Sacred Symbols and the Adoption of Violence in Tamil Politics in Sri Lanka*, M.A Thesis, McMaster University, 1991.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
4. W.D. O'Flaherty, 'The Image of the Heretic in Gupta Puranas', in B.L. Smith (ed.), *Essays on Gupta Culture Delhi*: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983, p. 116.
5. B. Pfaffenberger, *Caste in Tamil Culture*, Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1982, p. 121-122; R. Thapar, 'The Image of the Barbarian in Early India', *Ancient Indian Social History*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1990, pp.152-192.
6. B. Pfaffenberger, 'The Cultural Dimension of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka', *Asian Survey* vol. XXI no 11, Nov. 1981, p.1149-1150.
7. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 'The Politics of the Tamil Past', J. Spencer (ed), *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 107-124.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
9. S. Pathmanathan (1978) and S. Gnanaprakasam (1928) have on the other hand favoured a ksatriya connection. All these discussions on genealogy and varna status are highly speculative, but a maravar connection would seem more realistic in the light of linguistic and historical evidence. The Aryacakravartis of Jaffna were also known by the title *Cetukavalan*, meaning, the lord of the bridge—connecting Mannar and Ramesvaram. The *Cetupatis* of Ramanad, the traditionally acknowledged guardians of the bridge, not only bore the same title but have been known to have earned the title *Aryacakravarti* through allegiance and service to the Pantiyen kings. These *Cetupatis* were descendants of maravars, the martial predators dominant in the Ramanad district, who have a long record of engaging in predatory wars in Sri Lanka. See E. Thurstan (1909) on Maravar.
10. S. Pathmanathan, 'The Hindu Society in Sri Lanka: Changed and Changing', J.R. Carter (ed.), *Religiousness in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Marga Institute, 1979, p. 158. For a different view on this issue of identity see R. Coomaraswamy, *Politics of Ethnicity The Ethnic Conflict* (1984), p. 179.
11. Cited in R. Ramanathapillai, 1991: 7-8. For a critical analysis of this issue see S. Ratnajeewan Hoole, 'The Tamils: A Definition and their Religion and Culture through Change', *Indian Church History Review*, vol. 36, 1992, pp. 88-135.
12. An account of *Rajarata* civilisation from a non-sectarian, non-colonial perspective is, to my knowledge, still to be written. This is a probable outline of that account.
13. B. Stein, 1980: 23, S. J. Tambiah, 1976: 113.
14. Mu. Varadarajan, *A History of Tamil Literature*, Delhi, Sahtya Akademi, 1988., K. Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*, Wiesbaden, 1974.