
TAKING THE DEVOLUTION DISCOURSE FORWARD

N. Sathiya Moorthy

Combined with Constitutional Affairs Minister D E W Gunasekara's reiteration of President Mahinda Rajapakse's oft-repeated promise to enforce the 'two-language formula' for government appointments, LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingham's recent call for renewed efforts for a political settlement to the 'Sri Lankan issue' may have lent a new dimension to the national/international debate on power devolution in the country. If enforced as the polity and society exist, the 'two-language policy' mentioned by Minister Gunasekara, could highlight existing realities that also need to be addressed, if fresh troubles were not to brew up when permanent peace returns to the troubled nation.

All debates on 'power devolution' thus far have centred on political issues, even when it has involved the claims to a separate identity for the Muslims, and maybe even of the 'Eastern Tamils'. Such debates have also stopped at the political model of a federal or confederate state, as the panacea for all ills afflicting the larger Sri Lankan society, caused by the 'twin-evils' of the fifties. These evils related to the proclamation of Sinhala as the sole official language of the Sri Lankan State, and the 'standardisation policy' in education. In turn, these two issues were at the bottom of the Tamil resentment, which has since spiralled into LTTE militancy and terrorism.

Unfortunately, however, no discourse on power devolution in Sri Lanka has addressed either of these issues. For even in the none-too-distant past, the failure to enforce the 'Two-Language Policy', guaranteed through a constitutional amendment after it was promised under the India-Sri Lanka Agreement of 1987, has been used only as a 'talking point' by the LTTE and the larger Tamil community, to 'expose' the 'insincerity' of the Sri Lankan State and the Sinhala polity. None talks any more about a more equitable distribution of government jobs or education opportunities. The high cost of professional and other university education, coupled with the inadequate number of institutions imparting the same, have affected not just the Tamils, but the Sinhalas, Muslims and Burghers as well.

Going beyond Minister Gunasekara's offer of financial incentives for Government staff willing to learn the language that is not their mother-tongue – Sinhala or Tamil – the existing scheme may benefit not the 'fighting Tamils' from the North and the East, but only the 'Plantation Tamils' of Indian origin, and also the Tamil-speaking Muslims. It is only these communities that have encouraged their younger generation to pick up all three languages – Tamil, Sinhala and English. The Sinhalas, out of laxity caused by numerical majority, and the 'Sri Lankan Tamils' from the North and the East, as a political statement, have let full five decades pass by, without bothering to learn the 'other language'.

So politicised has the issue become that the Tamils from the North and the East, who have migrated to the national capital of Colombo after obtaining a private sector job, have failed/refused to learn Sinhala in the 'Sinhala heartland'. For the Sinhala majority of the present-day generation, Tamil is what the 'Tigers' speak. They fear the Tigers, but do not respect Tamil as an ancient language – worthy of learning.

Unfortunately at present, the Sinhalas, and also the Tamils from the North and the East, spend their time getting equipped for Government jobs. For the Government to be taken seriously on the promised proposal, it will have to facilitate language-learning at all levels and corners of the small nation. This again can be handled only by 'language teachers' from among the 'Plantation Tamils' and the Tamil-speaking Muslims. Until such time as the Tamils of the North and the East, and also the Sinhalas pick up the 'other language; they could also end up resenting the 'Plantation Tamils' and the Tamil-speaking Muslims at the same time, if the issue is not addressed before too late. In another era, they were together in it to deny citizenship to the Tamils of Indian origin, citizenship.

It is not as if jobs and other social issues are just community-based, or even community-centric. Permanent peace and a political solution are sure to rake up 'dead issues', or 'non-existent issues' which have now been consumed by the civil war. Within the Sinhala community, the 'JVP insurgencies' in the past were symptoms of a deep-rooted malaise that the

system and the State sought to wish away. Likewise, the distinctions, and not just the differences, between the 'Sri Lankan Tamils' in the North and the East, are too real to be dismissed as only a miniscule part of the militant nuisance that 'Karuna rebellion' is to the LTTE.

What is the way out? One is the constitutionally-mandated 'job quotas' for individual ethnic communities, based on updated decennial Census figures, with both the figures reviewed periodically. These quotas could be extended to the education sector as well. For those who think that a federal or confederate state could take care of such issues, Central Government jobs would still remain outside the purview of the provincial governments. For those who resent reservations as a policy and wonder about the methodology, the 'Indian experience' in the immediate neighbourhood will be of great relevance. Job and educational quotas have helped

in spreading education and enlightenment in India, and also improve employee-profile in the case of non-mainstream segments – together ensuring 'social justice' in a big way.

What is also unique about the 'Indian experience' is the Supreme Court judgment in the mid-nineties, fixing a 50-per cent upper-limit for all quotas, and enunciating the 'creamy layer' theory for denying reservations to the economically well-off from socially-backward sections, through the 'Mandal case' verdict. Yet to be enforced, this has ensured that merit too gets its due. It is also because of this that the 'quota question' is already back in the national centre-stage in India, and the Supreme Court has once again taken notice of the same. This is again something that an emerging Sri Lanka can learn from the Indian neighbour before evaluating the same and evolving a 'Sri Lankan model' to address Sri Lankan concerns. ■

N. Sathya Moorthy, is from the Observer Research Foundation Chennai.

Carters' Strike

On August 13th 1906, 5000 carters in Colombo struck work against a Municipal Ordinance prohibiting them from sitting on the cart or yoke while driving through the streets. The carters resisted as it meant walking long distances. The strike paralysed the commercial life of Colombo which depended on bullock carts for the transport of goods. The three-day strike was supported in militant ways by other Colombo workers, and the Pettah was reported to be under siege of crowds. When the Ordinance was withdrawn the carters celebrated the first victory of the working class of Colombo. A letter in the *Ceylon Independent* on August 18th 1906 said:

The carters' strike has supplied a splendid lesson to all communities on the value of unity. The carters are men of various castes and creeds... but they left all religious and racial differences aside and combined most effectively.

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Centenary of the Carters' Strike of 1906

