

Pravāda

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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and Propositions.

FAREWELL TO NATIONALISM

Do ethnic questions have ethnic solutions? *Pravada* posed this question in a previous issue and suggested that a solution, at least for Sri Lanka's crisis, ought to be democratic and non-ethnic.

We wish to return to this question once more, particularly in view of the failure of the Parliamentary Select Committee to arrive at a consensus framework for a political settlement. What the Select Committee managed to produce at the end of 1992, after one and half years of deliberations, was not a consensus, but a majority agreement among Sinhalese political parties. The Tamil leaders hastened to cry foul at this unanticipated development and the somewhat intemperate language in which the Tamil response to the Moonesinghe report was couched clearly indicated that the Select Committee had not evolved, even over its long period of existence, into a forum where ethnic minds could meet. It demonstrated quite clearly that if these minds continue to be ethnic ones—Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim—, any negotiating forum was certain to turn into a mere colloquium for the exchange of extravagant rhetoric.

We have repeatedly critiqued the ideologies of Sinhala nationalism and argued for the crucial need to abandon Sinhalese sectarian positions, if Sinhalese society does want to find a way out of the abyss of the present war. At the same time, we feel strongly that a critique of Tamil nationalist politics, re-formulated in a secular and democratic idiom, is required so as to create room for the legitimate aspirations of the Tamil people.

As evident in recent statements issued by Tamil political parties presently based in Colombo—otherwise known as the 'democratic' Tamil groups—one crucial problem of their political behaviour is that they have allowed the LTTE to define their own political agenda. It is quite understandable that they have to be mindful of the inevitable wrath of the LTTE if they accept a political package which would be perceived by Prabhakaran as a 'sell-out.' However, this should not necessarily imply that they should try to be more 'Tamil nationalist' than the LTTE. If they want to remain 'nationalist' and find a framework for a solution within the general parameters of Tamil aspirations, they have to be moderate and pragmatist nationalists. Moderation and pragmatism in politics imply, in this context, a political agenda sensitive to political realities that may not accommodate fundamentalist negotiating positions.

Nationalist fundamentalism is a formulation that can capture the essence of the angry outbursts of purer-than-thou rhetoric that some Tamil political leaders deployed when the Moonesinghe and Sirinivasan proposals were being debated. The formulation that 'Merger is Non-negotiable' is the concrete manifestation of this state of political mind. Sitting at the negotiation table with firm and seemingly unbargainable positions could well be a tactical posture; but, when some long-awaited movement begins to occur in a compromise process, continuous resort to original firmness and harping on the original sins of



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others can amount to intransigence. It can very well result in the closing up of openings that do not come by everyday.

This criticism is by no means intended as justifying the parochial Sinhalese arguments being presented to oppose extensive devolution and regional devolutionary autonomy to a unit acceptable to the Tamil masses. What we are really concerned with is the need for a **compromise** that should be located somewhere between the maximalist stands of all parties at the table.

Let us take the crucial issue of merger/non-merger. If Sinhalese and Tamil political parties remain inflexible on their respective exclusivist positions on this issue, then no compromise can conceivably be made. As much as Tamil parties can say that non-merged units would not meet the Tamil people's aspirations and honour, Sinhalese parties can also say that a merger

would not be accepted by the Sinhalese people. This can go on *ad infinitum*. That is precisely why negotiations should work for, and not close the door to, a compromise.

Political compromises, by definition, are made by moderates, not by maximalists. For compromises to be possible, those who negotiate cannot represent the extremisms that have so far haunted our polity. That is why the UNP, the SLFP and other Sinhala parties, if they seriously want a **negotiated settlement** worked out, should denounce and separate themselves from the whole bunch of Sinhalese extremists—*Hela Urumaya*, *Jathika Chinthanaya*, the *Bhumi Putras* and the Sinhalese Defence League. That is also why democratic Tamil political parties should not allow themselves to be inhibited or governed by their own past rhetoric of the maximalist Tamil nationalist discourse. If political parties, to whom history has entrusted the responsibility of finding a negotiated settlement, fail in this endeavour, they will have no one but themselves to blame, because ultimately *bhumiputras* from all ethnic groups will monopolize even the little political space yet available.

Since we are here addressing mainly the democratic Tamil political parties, we wish to point out that their political task should not be confined merely to securing greater devolution within an acceptable spatial unit. Whether they like it or not, their task now encompasses the democratic agenda of the entire Sri Lankan polity. It would certainly be a mistake for them to think that the North-east question is politically enclosed within the Tamil ethnic formation. The real meaning of both the unit and the extent of devolution to North-east will ultimately be determined by the degree of democratization in the structures of the Sri Lankan state and in the entirety of Sri Lankan society. During the separatist project of Tamil nationalism, its exclusive focus was on the Tamil polity. Any post-separatist Tamil project cannot, and should not, be separated from a broad democratic reform agenda which

would invariably include drastic reforms at the center.

Paradoxically, the initiative for a pan-Sri Lankan democratic project too has fallen on the shoulders of democratic Tamil parties, because the Sinhalese parties, as contemporary Sri Lankan political processes testify, have already abdicated that task. Instead of preparing society for a democratic transformation, Sinhalese parties in the opposition are engaged in short term political enterprises that have no significant bearing on the democratic tasks of the day.

The backwardness of the Sinhalese polity is in a way being constantly reinforced by the political indigence of its party, religious and intellectual leaders. This was amply demonstrated by the sheer unwillingness of political leaders to take a clear and unequivocally positive stand on a federalist alternative for Sri Lanka at a time—i.e. November-December, 1992—when Sinhalese society would have been ready to welcome, with relative ease, such a broad reform package. The Sinhalese parties allow themselves to be intimidated by each other and terrorized by minuscule groups of zealous racists, whenever a solution to the ethnic question is in sight. Similarly, certain religious and intellectual leaders, whose professed task is to 'defend the nation'—have come out with the most primitive arguments against a political settlement, thereby exposing the appallingly low depths of their own intellectual destitution, political ignorance and resultant racism.

The question of re-thinking ethnic nationalism thus comes to the fore, over and over again. It is time that Sri Lanka's political debate concerning a solution to the ethnic question liberates itself from nationalist debates. Let ardent nationalists of all ethnic groups debate the primitive arguments that make no contribution at all to Sri Lanka's future. Let democrats among nationalists bid farewell to nationalism in a search for democratic alternatives. **P**