

NEED FOR A VIRTUAL ALLIANCE OF THE DIGITAL DIASPORAS

An alternative component for peace building in Sri Lanka

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Multitudes of dimensions have been explored in the issue of peace building in Sri Lanka from grass root empowerment to successfully completing a negotiated peace deal. The Sri Lankan question because of its sheer magnitude of the conflict has exploded far from the limits of the nation state. This was in more modern terms identified as the internationalization of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The internationalist theorists already have carried out in depth analysis of the above from its impact on foreign policy to unimaginable spread of LTTE front offices and the international propaganda machinery installed subsequently to fund the separatist struggle.

The article attempts to locate this internationalization in a more micro context and fix a pointer to the phenomenon of how Information Communication technology contributed to opening up a whole new dimension to it. Thus the context is how ethnic Diaspora (Tamil and Sinhala) fused into the cyber space to create the entity of a virtual Diaspora¹. They have been a major contributory factor to the local conflict and is yet to be identified as a critical component of the ongoing peace process and efforts of peace building with in Sri Lanka.

Diasporas are frequently described as "imagined communities." Borrowing from Benedict Anderson (1983), this characterization underlines, on the one hand, the improbability of experiencing first-hand contact with the entire group and, on the other, the adherence of its members to similar beliefs, symbols and myths. Anthony King (forthcoming) points out that Anderson's work was limited to that of nation-state; however, a number of other Diaspora scholars apply the notion of "imagined community" to emphasise the diasporic connections facilitated by various media and the simultaneous consumption of the same content by members of a transnational group (see Karim, forthcoming).

Diasporas are often viewed as deterritorialised "nations." The concept of nation has long been linked to a singular ethnic group's placement within a particular geographic location. This notion is integral to the mythical lore of many groups, establishing strong emotional links to a particular landscape that serve to exclude others' overlapping territorial claims. Forced or voluntary migrations diminish the physical links of those who leave the homeland; but they take with them the mythical and linguistic allusions to the ancestral territory, which they invoke in nostalgic reminiscences. Some hold on to a hope of eventual return.

This creates the demand for cultural products that maintain and ritually celebrate the links of the diaspora with the homeland. The dispersed settlements of transnations also exchange symbolic goods and services, including media content, among each other, thus sustaining global networks. Homeland politics forms a major topic for the media of some diasporas, especially those consisting largely of first generation migrants. Ties to the former country remain strong in these cases and individuals seek out the most current information, especially in times of crisis. Now popular Tamil website www.tamilnet.com was launched in 1997 to cater to this new niche.

The Sinhalese Diaspora responds with its own source of web resources and carries the uniform message of a Sinhalese Nation. The Australian based Spur website is a classic example for this. This website responded to the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE as "surrendering democracy and rewarding terrorism". Even in a time where efforts are going onto restart a peace process the Spur site carries the banner "Es gedi Dekata Henagahilada Sihalunne?" (Sinhalese ?Are you blinded by a thunderbolt) a literal statement borrowed from an old patriotic prose.

The new media emerging from the technological advents of Computer Mediated Communication seem especially suited to the needs of diasporic communities. Transnational communities are also making extensive use of on-line services like Email, Internet Relay Chat, Usenet, Listserv, and the World Wide Web. These global networks are allowing for relatively easy connections for members of communities residing in various continents. As opposed to the broadcast model of communication, which apart from offering limited access to minority groups, is linear, hierarchical, and capital intensive, on-line media allow easier access and are non-linear, largely non-hierarchical, and relatively cheap (Karim, Smeltzer and Loucheur, 1998). The ability to exchange messages with individuals on the other side of the planet and to have access to community information almost instantaneously changes the dynamics of diaspora, allowing for qualitatively and quantitatively enhanced linkages

Alternatively the location of electronic data, Uniform Resource Locators in particular, situate the Internet and the world wide web (www) as geographically based systems with corresponding geopolitical reference points in the physical world. Rather than

recognizing the networks formed through on-line data exchange, the prevailing archeology of the Internet and www ties individuals to physical locations. This perpetuates the belief that our planet consists of a conglomeration of nation-states with bounded territories and national subjects, sustaining, as a consequence, the inequities inherent to this way of organization.

But some websites, however, resist this model, such as those launched by cyber citizens of Tamil Eelam, members of what might be termed a stateless nation that uses the World Wide Web to argue their agenda, organize, and inform electronic visitors. The designers of these sites employ the notion of networks rather than presupposing that geographical referents are the primary framework for meaningful exchanges paving way for the transformation of Diaspora interaction to a virtual community².

Thus the virtual Diaspora are important stake holders of an internal conflict especially on the lines of ethno nationalistic separatism. As they provide a phenomenon of globalization from below³ where the conflict is internationalized but within a framework of a global linked to the conflict context. Thus this makes them an important component in peace building efforts of a state as they can be a global voice to this peace process.

The importance of a Virtual Alliance of the Sinhala Tamil Virtual Diaspora in a peace building context can be presented as follows

- (I) This alliance may be formed through a few diaspora groups but they can immediately make an E appeal to other diaspora members and even virtual groups which affiliate themselves with websites.
- (II) The new cyber alliance can have a bigger impact on the international stake holders, donors and other interested parties of the Sri Lankan conflict. The virtual diasporas as global grassroots possess greater reach and limited barriers in addressing the above parties
- (III) The alliance can be a virtual window to other civil society organizations operating from locations in cyber space. They can come in form of interest groups. Alternative newsgroups and even individuals of academic interest
- (IV) An alliance on web can create a unbiased portal towards the country in cases of issues which rise with the peace building process. Currently the BBC news site have links to websites which cater to one or more of these diasporas.

But in the Sri Lankan context though the internal efforts for peace between the two conflict parties have been tested their global representation through respective Diasporas are yet to declare a truce. In the transnational context international governments and powerful donor countries are vital in facilitating and supporting this peace process. But this virtual diaspora is similar to a "transnational grass roots element" to this conflict thus if they also declare a truce it is going to have a major impact on the whole international outlook towards the local problem. Thus this means if both Sinhala and Tamil Diasporas used the medium of cyber space to press for their agendas they can also use it as an alternative space to form a virtual alliance promoting the peace process and peace building in Sri Lanka as a conflict transformative medium.

End Notes

¹ Virtual diaspora, we mean the use of cyberspace by immigrants or descendants of an immigrant group for the purpose of participating or engaging in online interactional transactions.

² One of the new concepts emerging in relation to this new world, to Cyberspace, is *Virtual Communities*. It is a concept formed to describe some of the new social "life forms" we are starting to see in Cyberspace. Virtual Communities does not cover all these new "life forms" and definitely not all interesting aspects of Cyberspace but it is one of the most interesting phenomena's in Cyberspace. Howard Rheingold was the premier Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) theoretician and defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". This concept has been developed immensely in many other works on Computer Mediated Communications and new Community studies.

³ "Globalization-from-below" is carried out mainly by organizations that do not have strong links with governments or large corporations. Organizations such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace are transnational civil society groups that monitor the performance of governments on human rights and environmental protection, respectively. Others like the International Committee for the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières act as relief agencies around the world. Academic and professional associations, religious organizations, diasporic groups etc. also participate in "globalization-from-below" by developing lateral communication links between members in various parts of the world. They may not necessarily challenge international governmental activities or transnational corporations, but they are nevertheless distinct from them. ■

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