

THE ETHNIC CRISIS: POLITICS DEVOID OF ECONOMICS

Mano Rajya

A panel discussion on the "North East Crisis - Possible solutions" was held recently; the distinguished panelists included Hon. Gamini Dissanayake, Mr. Kumar Ponnambalam, and Hon. M.H.M. Ashraff and it was moderated by Dr. Uyangoda of the Colombo University. A lively discussion lasting about three hours followed the articulate presentations of the speakers. Unfortunately, rather than guiding us to a critical rethinking of our social predicament, the forum was just another in a series of seemingly 'progressive' dialogues with minimum impact on prevailing social consciousness.

Candidly, Mr. Ponnambalam disagreed with an introduction that stated that the North-East crisis was the number one national priority. Simply stated, the North and East issue is not a high national priority. From an economic point of view, where the donor countries and multilateral aid agencies are concerned, Sri Lanka is doing well. Our real GDP has increased by an average of 5% per annum during 1990-92, and the budget deficit has been reduced to around 7% of GDP from 11.2% in 1989. Average inflation has decelerated to about 11%, the current account deficit has declined to about 5.5% of GDP and overall balance of payments recorded surpluses in 1990-92. Thus the donor community, if taken as a forum of international consent, has endorsed our economic achievements by granting an aid package that is higher than that of last year (at least in nominal terms).

From a purely economic perspective the fiscal burden of the civil war, or defense spending rose from 3.1% of GDP in 1989 to 4.2% in 1992. But even if the war would cease tomorrow, that 4.2% GDP would probably increase in the wake of expenditure for rehabilitation. Therefore, most affluent Sri Lankans would silently agree with Mr. Ponnambalam that the war is not a national priority. Obviously, there is something very wrong in this callous economic rationalization when such a barbarous ethnic crisis, taking mostly the lives of the marginalized poor, prevails in our society.

As the presentations commenced, each speaker eloquently defended his stance with reasoned arguments of political and emotional appeal. Pointing to a history of betrayal of the Tamils by Sinhalese leaders, Mr. Ponnambalam justified the cause for a separate Tamil linguistic region. Mr. Ashraff, defending the Muslim cause, called for a politico-military solution, where a negotiated settlement will demand the consideration of religious factors. Representing a moderate Sinhalese position, Mr. Dissanayake proposed the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord as a beginning

for a process of restructuring the democratic system. He concluded by asserting the absurdity of searching for illusory territorial boundaries of various historic kingdoms when we are struggling with real economic issues of malnutrition and poverty.

Except for that passing comment on poverty and malnutrition and a question from the audience about refugees dying in impoverished living conditions, the whole evening was a discussion of rhetorical politics devoid of the economics of social production and of material needs. It is this separation of politics from economics that remains the fundamental self-deceiving fallacy of the contemporary social milieu in attempting to even vaguely understand the framework of our social crisis.

Suddenly, the world seemed perfect with this mystic dissipation of the extremes of poverty and wealth. There were no affluent Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims with drastically different political and economic interests from their the less-fortunate brethren of common ethnicity. The rich, professional urban elite Tamil, Muslim or a Sinhalese were destined to identify and defend their redefined ethnicity regardless of their material interests. The social and material inequalities of capacity and entitlement seemed to wither away in a glorified ethnic identity.

By using the term "Tamils" Mr. Ponnambalam was able to speak on behalf of a homogenized 25% of the population including the Muslims. Mr. Ashraff, emphasizing the atrocities committed against the Muslims accentuated the issue of religion, justifying the Muslim position. Mr. Dissanayake, representing the dominant majority, and being a political moderate, suggested state-craft, how to improve the system to incorporate the multi-ethnic nature of our society. But, all were in the conceptual framework of grand ethnic totalities: Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese, where an ethnic essence preceded material existence.

Meanwhile the top 10% of households received 43% of the national income in 1985-86 according to World Bank statistics in 1992. A study using 1986-87 data has shown that the incidence of poverty nation-wide was 24% and 28.7% in rural areas. Considering the fact that this was at the end of a period before the civil crisis in 1987-89 and before renewed privatization, the prospects for improved social conditions remain bleak. While this may seem a bit drastic, politics devoid of economics has the tendency to mystify the more crucial economic equity aspects of social development which cut across all ethnic



groups. Essentially, the focus on the ethnic issue was a questioning of whether a poor rural farmer would prefer to be deprived of a livelihood by a capitalist or a common ethnic heritage. In the present antagonistic social arrangement, politics has acquired the focus of sound public administration or of efficient government while economic maldevelopment is considered exogenous to the process. The exhausted discourse of political democracy has tactfully evaded its inherent connection with economic freedom and ethical notions of the equitable distribution of social product.

Similarly, economics devoid of politics as practiced by the mainstream international and local practitioners arrive at parallel but equally spurious conclusions. An emphasis on the increase in tourism in 1992, the highest since 1984, can easily disregard the fact that close to 700,000 registered refugees are suffering in dismal living conditions. Human beings who were brutally murdered, those that survive with physical and mental handicaps and a future generation who have been socialized into a context of violence and warfare fail to enter the economics of sustainability. So we are absorbed in achieving macroeconomic objectives such as maintaining a GDP growth rate of 6% per annum, reducing the fiscal deficit, reducing the external current account deficit and maintaining relative price stabilities, never mind the refugees or the blood letting that continues in this perverse "economic" normality.

The emphasis on the ethnic stratification of society, and its analysis in purely political terms, mystify the more crucial issue of the increasing gulf between wealth and poverty.

The social context of the discussion also reveals certain contradictions. The audience that evening was mostly middle-aged or older, middle-class professional men. One may attribute this to the conducting of the discussion in English. But what about the middle-class professional English speaking women and educated youth? Was there no interest on their part? and why? Is intellectual political discussion another patriarchal social ritual? Even if one admits that the number of English speaking women

and youth are small and the lack of publicity for the event, all those who attended that forum must question this particularity of the audience. And what about the wealthy? Are the ruling elite not interested in ethnicity?

In short, most of us continue to deceive ourselves that these discussions form a viable way of arriving at objective solutions. We assume the system is politically benevolent in order to disregard the economic structural underpinnings that sustain an antagonistic system for the benefit of a few. One cannot reduce all social phenomenon to economic material practice, but practical activity in the course of satisfying our material needs does transform prevailing social consciousness. The purpose of similar discussions must be to enhance the ability to transform rather than reproduce enduring but myopic ethnic illusions.

So the economists will continue on their way to sustain a 6% annual growth rate to achieve NIC status and the political scientist will grapple with ethnicity and the efficient restructuring of the state apparatus. We reproduce the same structures of superficial social relations of goodwill that undermine social development and in-turn self-preservation. Thus the marginalized are left with no recourse but to organize themselves to be heard, sometimes in suicidal violence, to protest against a system that has neglected them in the process of "sustainable development".

Unless we are able to look at social issues from a broader perspective, with a multi-disciplinary approach that helps in getting at the whole picture, and make concrete efforts to address the equity issue, we will be locked into an inherent system of partial truths and enduring social instability. But then, a de-stabilized economy also has its beneficiaries. That night Mr. Ashraff was partially correct in admitting that he saw no solution, and Mr. Ponnambalam too, in observing that the ethnic crisis is not a high priority national issue and Mr. Dissanayake, in mentioning that the term 'socialist democratic republic' of Sri Lanka is a myth. While it is necessary to rethink the issue, it also matters how we begin to rethink it and on whose behalf.

While hunger rules, peace cannot prevail. He who wants to ban war must also ban poverty. Morally it makes no difference whether a human being is killed in war or is condemned to starve to death because of the indifference of others.

Willy Brandt
North South Commission
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