

# PEACE - THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Radhika Coomaraswamy

The proposals made by Minister S. Thondaman have unleashed forces which appear to have a *deja-vu* quality about them. For those with a historical memory, there is a constant flashback to 1959, 1967, 1981 and of course 1987. Proposals put forward to end ethnic strife in this country are like political magnets. On all sides they bring out our worst fears and suspicions, like the sub-conscious rising to the fore in unrepressed fury.

For those of us interested in democratic process, there has to be concern over this "instant replay" of proposals leading to hysteria, hysteria leading to inflexibility, inflexibility leading to further militarisation and finally we await a lull in the fighting for a new set of proposals to emerge (often more dramatic than the earlier set) and the cycle begins afresh. We must also remember that there are safeguards and that any substantial constitutional amendment with regard to the resolution of the ethnic crisis will require a two-thirds majority in parliament and probably a referendum.

For many people, any peace package is integrally linked to perceptions about the LTTE - a fighting force about which one English commentator after watching a BBC production claimed, "I don't know what they do to the enemy, but they sure as hell scare the life out of me." Can one compromise with such militancy is a question that is often raised by those opposing a peace package.

But to confuse the LTTE with the search for a political solution is to confound the problem further. Whether the LTTE is defeated or not, whether Prabhakaran lives or dies, the central question remains "what is the new social contract which will ensure harmonious sharing of power between the centre and the Tamil periphery?" After so many years of bloodshed, can we expect a return to a pre-1983 status-quo? To impose such a peace package is to force a "treaty of Versailles" on the Tamil people and it will only be a matter of a generation before another Prabhakaran emerges.

At the same time, the Tamil people should by now have learnt the costly price of asserting separatism, and any future leadership if it is to bring prosperity to the Tamils must also understand this fundamental truth.

In fact, one may argue that to say no political solution before a military victory is to beg the question. The fate of the LTTE among its own people and in the international community will greatly be determined by its ability to respond to a generous and fair proposal for peace which also protects the rights of the Sinhalese and the Muslims living in those areas. If the Jaffna citizen has gathered up the courage to put up posters in defiance of the LTTE, it is surely because Mr. Thondaman, on the one hand and the Select Committee on the other, have given them hopes of a just peace.

Are we really going to turn our backs on these opportunities and strengthen the hand of the LTTE by showing the Jaffna citizen and the world that the Central Government and the Sinhalese people will not even consider a process which may lead to peace and a resolution of the present crisis - especially when Mr. Thondaman is not asking for a ceasefire? Surely no polity can be so shortsighted if it wants to retain the unity of the country.

We have come to an important juncture in our political history and to recognise this juncture is to realistically seize the opportunity for peace. On the one hand, it is apparent that the Sinhalese have to eschew the majoritarian politics of the 1950s and accept the need to share substantial power with the Tamil periphery. The Tamils, on the other hand, have to eschew separatism.

In between these two positions lies "the art of the possible", "the area of negotiation". Any leadership of either community which refuses to learn this lesson at this point of our history will fuel the self-destruction of their respective communities, either permanent dismemberment, or effective genocide, or both.

To see negotiations on the resolution of the ethnic conflict as the "art of the possible" and not as an ethnic birth-right is the only way forward for both communities. In both the Tamil and Sinhala ethnic groups there is the "hard-core" who see every opportunity for compromise as an act of betrayal. Their mutually exclusive perceptions and fears have driven the country to the brink of disaster. We have to finally learn to turn away from the primordial and work toward what is possible.

If negotiations on the peace package are approached with the proper mindset, then thondaman's proposals leave the sphere of "demonology" and become part of the process of negotiation and compromise. In looking at past negotiations in this regard there appear to be the following five areas of contention:

- 1 The North-East merger;
- 2 The nature of devolved power and the significance of the "concurrent list" as well as "national policy" in this area;
- 3 Law and order;
- 4 Land;
- 5 Financial autonomy.

In every area there have been many proposals put forward by different groups, and many academic and research articles written by scholars of diverse backgrounds both here and abroad. What is needed is a rational assessment of these proposals and a creative attempt at compromise to ensure that the security and rights of all communities are recognised. The Select Committee will hopefully undertake its task with this sense of responsibility.

Let us in this assessment of peace and war not forget the civilians of all communities. It is true that we must protect the rights of future generations of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, that is our task, but we also cannot afford to forget the present. Before we drown ourselves in moral self-righteousness, let us think of them who suffer silently. When we empathise with their pain there cannot be any communal boundaries, only a common humanity:

*And therein lies the agony  
The Agony and the horror  
That after all there was no martyrdom  
Only the futility -  
The futility of dying  
The end of nothing  
And the beginning of nothing*

*I weep red tears of blood  
your blood.*

*(Anne Ranasinghe to my Mother)*