

ONE NATION OR MANY: OBSERVATIONS ON THE SRI LANKAN CRISIS

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It may be helpful (if any such rational analysis can ever be in the politically charged context of present day Sri Lanka) to start by stating that Sri Lanka is an island whose people practice four religions (principally, with several others for very small fractions of the populations) - Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity; and speak three languages (again principally) - Sinhala, Tamil and English. Numerically Christianity is practised by the smallest proportion among the four religions and English is the first language of few but the second language of many. But the cultural influence of Christianity and English far exceeds the numerical strength of their practitioners. They are part and parcel of the modern/colonial - post colonial history of Sri Lanka. Geographically, Sri Lanka is divided into North, East, South and West plus the interior. People speak of the dry zone and plantation areas in the interior and the four "NEWS" regions along the coast.

Four religions, two or three languages and at least six regions provide 48 or 72 combinations of religion/language/region. A religion/language/region trichotomy does not, of course, exhaust the lines along which people's consciousness and living practice can be classified. A most important omission is gender which cuts across the trichotomy. An earlier generation of writers would have put class above all other dimensions. There is also of course caste - that very peculiarly South Asian category - which permeates Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists as well as Christians across South Asia. But only a few of these "cells" are non-empty. Thus Sinhala speaking people are primarily Buddhist or Christian, Tamil speakers are Hindu, Muslim or Christian. English speakers are Christians as well as Buddhists or Hindus etc.

In terms of regions, Tamils are largely in the North, the East and the plantations (upcountry) regions but they are also in the West (Colombo region). Sinhali speakers are also around the island.

Thus while it is possible and indeed predominant practice to think of "the problem" as that of Sinhala Buddhist v/s Tamil Hindus, and North and East versus the Rest, even if such a problem was "settled", it would leave many issues of Sri Lankan politics unresolved. Muslims and Burghers and plantation Tamils do not fit easily into the duality as currently conceptualised.

Table 1: Sri Lanka: Language x Religion matrix

Language/Religion	Buddhism	Hinduism	Islam	Christianity
Sinhala	x		x	x
Tamil		x	x	x
English	x	x	x	x

Thus in the language x religion matrix above, the first two rows and columns have the two major groups around whom the duality is constructed. But around that 2x2 matrix, are the other columns and other rows which cannot and should not be ignored. [This is similar to the situation in Israel-Palestine. It is not of Jews versus Muslims because there are Christian Arabs as well.

Table 2: Sri Lanka: Language x Region Matrix

	West	South	North	East	Interior Dry	Interior Plantation
Sinhala	x	x		x	x	
Tamil	x		x	x		x
English	x	x	x	x	x	x

Similarly if we look at language x region (omitting English speakers as they are spread across the islands), the symmetry of West, South and Dry zone for Sinhala speakers and North, East and Plantation for Tamil speakers is spoiled by Sinhala speakers in the East and Tamil speakers in the West. While the last two are minorities, their presence cannot be ignored.

Nationhood in South Asia

Nationhood can be defined along a variety of ways but more recently two ways have been emphasised - territorial and ethnic. In the history of South Asia, nationhood has been constructed along religious lines [Hindu/Muslim nations as by the Muslim League and Jinnah in the 1940's India]. Religion however was not enough to keep Pakistan together and in 1971, it broke up as between the Bengalis speaking Muslim East Pakistan Bangladesh and West Pakistan/Pakistan which is Muslim but multilingual.

Bangladesh did not become part of a United (red) Bengal as many thought likely in 1971 but religion and language jointly crystallised the separate nationality of the Bangladeshis as opposed to Bengalis of West Bengal. In the doomed struggle for Khalistan, some Sikhs defused their nationhood as along religion/language and territory lines. [I have dealt with some of these issues in Desai (1997).]

For the present India has chosen to define herself as a multi-religious multi-lingual, multi regional polity where nationhood is defined along territorial lines. There are tensions in this definition - most recently due to the articulation of Hindutva by the BJP [see Vanaik (1997)]. But the dynamics of parliamentary democracy has for the time being reasserted the multi-religious, multi-regional and multi-lingual polity. Pakistan has defined its nationhood along a dominant religion but multiple language, multiple regional yet single territorial lines. There are again tensions due for example, to the dominance of Punjab, the identity problems of the Mohajirs, the Shia-Sunni divisions etc., but Pakistan remains a territorial entity. The dispute about Kashmir is all the more intense because of the need in both India and Pakistan to define nationhood along territorial lines.

Nationhood in Sri Lanka

Against this brief excursion into other South Asian nationhood, how do we think of Sri Lankan nationhood? It would seem that Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as articulated since the mid 1950's would like to define Sri Lanka as a single religion, single language nation across its entire territory. This is what compels its champions to retell the story of Sri Lankan history along a seamless 2500 year tale of Sinhala Buddhist domination. Whatever the veracity of such a story (and truth is never objectively - i.e. in a universally accepted way - definable in this context) its construction is compelled by the programme of nationhood which it is meant to bolster.

In its own view Sinhala Buddhism thinks of Sri Lanka as a single unitary territory with provinces but not regions or states. In this it is dissimilar to both India and Pakistan but more akin to Bangladesh. But it lacks the single language, single religion domination that Bengali Muslims enjoy in Bangladesh. As seen above not all Sinhala speakers are Buddhists and a Sinhala Buddhist identity would exclude anywhere upto 30% of the population. By comparison, in Bangladesh, Bengali Muslims are in the 90% plus range.

To define Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist nation, is plausible if nationhood is defined along ethnic lines. It is in claiming the entire territory of Sri Lanka for this particular nation that problems have arisen. Even if the remaining 30% or so had been divided in negligible proportions along other dimensions [in the other 47 or 71 cells], there would have arisen questions of minority rights as human rights in any Constitution. In that case, some accommodation could have been found which would have recognised minorities as having rights as such - as minorities - relative to a majoritarian hegemonic national identity defined along language/religion lines.

[Even with the numerical dominance of Bengali speaking Muslims, Bangladesh has had to face the issue of Chittagong hill tribes. The

"problem" of Bihari Muslims who "belong" to Pakistan is another instance of how minorities even when small have to be accommodated in a one-nation state.]

But of course, in Sri Lanka, the 30% minority is neither evenly scattered across the island, nor will a simple accommodation as minority be sufficient given the history of 20th Century Sri Lanka. For one thing there is a large minority - the Tamils who have a claim to be the co-community of Sri Lanka. For another this community has large regional concentration in the North and the East as well as in the interior "upcountry" area.

Independence without Nationhood

Sri Lanka became independent without a protracted nationalist struggle, violent or non violent as in the case of India. Indeed the story of Ceylon becoming Sri Lanka is one of collaboration between the British and the various fractions of the local people. Thus Sri Lankan nationhood was not defined sharply as a reaction to the imperial presence. British presence was in some ways less "other" in Ceylon, as it then was, than in India. As a majority community, Sinhala Buddhist defined themselves more in opposition to Christian (Catholic) or Muslim or Malayalee speaking communities [Jayawardene (1986)]. It was by constructing the other as alien-foreign, Indian, that the "local" was crystallised.

The lack of a national struggle meant that when independence came it was granted rather than won. The constitution of independent Ceylon was not drafted by an elected Constituent Assembly, but handed over by the British. Thus, the task of defining nationhood was carried out not consensually as in (post-partition) India, but in the populist pressures of democratic electoral politics. In a democracy with a first-past-the post electoral system, numbers are at a premium. A majority is a commanding position. The Westminster system also confers immense powers on the majority party in Parliament. If the majority community could also construct a parliamentary majority in a Westminster system then it can write its own ticket legally and constitutionally [this was the position of the Ulster protestants in Northern Ireland vis-a-vis the Catholics. It was the Catholic challenge to domination by the elected majority from 1968 onwards that made Northern Ireland a tough problem in British politics that is only now, after thirty years, coming close to resolution (March 1998)].

The definition of Sri Lankan nationhood was thus conducted through legislation in parliament, a process requiring simple majority rather than two-thirds or three fourths as in constitution making. From 1948 onwards therefore, there has been on the one hand an attempt by the majority community to define nationhood along Sinhala Buddhist lines. On the other hand there has been a pattern of resistance by the second largest group to insist on inclusion in such a definition or recognition as another Sri Lankan "nation".

The division along party political lines, very much British style, Right and Left at the outset diverted attention from the strength of the majority community. On the one hand the UNP and on the other an unstable coalition of Left, centre-left parties - SLFP, LSSP etc,

focused attention as a British style attenuation of governance. The battle in the domain of economic policy making between Right and Left also perhaps diverted attention from the very different basis along which the national question was being tackled. The Left parties - Stalinist, Trotskyis etc, were particularly diverted in this way, mistaking the populism of Sinhalese parties as representing genuine people centred or mass politics. The ignominious collapse of the Sri Lanka Left into majoritarian populism did a lot to remove the parliamentary option of the Tamil minority. There was no conceivable coalition that could obtain majority in parliament that would guarantee a legitimate place to Tamils in any definition of Sri Lankan nationhood.

Confronting the National Question:

Thus it was that from mid 1950's onwards the Sinhala-Tamil relations became extra parliamentary. Pacts were signed between Bandaranaike and Chelvanayakam in 1957, and between Senanayake and Chelvanayakam in 1965. The need to sign such pacts was a recognition that the parliamentary road was now impossible for the Tamils. At that time the battle centred on the issue of language. Was Sri Lanka a one language or a two language nation? [English was always to remain an extra elite language.]

The Sri Lankan state was also under other - economic - pressures. The failure to achieve sufficiently rapid growth which could absorb the expanding labour force in the rural and the urban areas led to the JVP led rebellion in 1971. The collectivist moves to accommodate these pressures were also populist in their preference of the majority over the minority.

During the 1970's, Sri Lanka maintained an extensive welfare provision and achieved a high level of human development. At the same time, its performance as an open economy deteriorated and it was too small to pursue an autarkic economic policy. The shift to a liberal economic regime was accompanied by a reduction in the welfare provision. The balance shifted even more against the poor of the minority community.

India gave itself a Constitution in 1949 and since the formation of the Republic in 1950 has accorded a central place to the Constitution. It is one of the longest in terms of number of articles. While it has been amended more than seventy times, there has never been talk of another constitution. By contrast, Sri Lanka has given itself new constitutions twice since independence. In 1972 and 1977, the Constitution changed but each time the issue of nationality for the non-Sinhala speaking community was not addressed. Indeed the Executive Presidency inaugurated by J.R.Jayewardene concentrated executive power even more than in the Westminster type government. There was no level above the elected government which could be appealed to by any minority.

For a while, a Tamil Party, TULF, attained the status of an official opposition Party but of course, in the context of an Executive Presidency it had less power than before. The pacts between the two communities thus became international with India playing Big Brother role through the 1980s. Events of 1983 no doubt gave spur

to India on this front. But by that time, several Tamil formations - EROS, EPRLF, LTTE - had abandoned parliaments and pacts.

Neither the 1983 understanding between India and Sri Lanka nor the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and the consequent Thirteenth Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution solved the issue. It was not possible for an outside power such as India to solve what is after all an internal issue of Sri Lankan people. The tensions within Sri Lankan society, even within the majority community about the national issue, manifested themselves in the assassination of President Premadasa as well as several other politicians echoing the earlier assassination of S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike in 1959.

A New Framework for Solution?

Two recent developments have changed the framework within which the national issue is being posed. First is the consensus among the majority community parties on economic policy. A Left/Right division still persists but it will lead to fewer reversals and restorations of the policies of rival parties in the economic sphere. Secondly, there has been a growing recognition that the unitarian structure of Sri Lanka needs to be modified by devolution. With some small differences, there is also consensus on this issue among the majority community parties [see ICES 1997].

There is now a Devolution package presented by the People's Alliance government which came in power in August 1994. This package takes the form of a new Constitution. This is the maximum offer that the majority community can agree to make to the minority community.

Of course, devolution by itself does not relate to the national question. The national question could have been settled in the 1950's even within a unitary framework if the 1957 Pact had been implemented. Thus in some abstract (though not very helpful) sense, devolution is neither necessary nor sufficient to solving the national problem.

But of course the context is not abstract and has not been since 1983. The context is a bloody military confrontation which has ebbed and flowed as between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army. The open military confrontation is in the North (Jaffna) area but terrorist attacks can be anywhere across the island. It is not only in terms of lives taken, but in terms of a constant feeling of insecurity, and of course in economics terms, of high and increasing military spending (up to 6.5% of GNP in 1997).

An Impossibility Result:

A Sinhala Buddhist nation can now (1998) be constituted in Sri Lanka in only two ways -

- (1) By winning the military battle decisively and permanently defeating the LTTE
- (2) By partitioning Sri Lanka into two territories.

Neither of these two ways is a stable solution to the national issue. Indeed in terms of a "monistic" definition of nationhood spanning the entire territory of the island, the second way is obviously a defeat but the first is also untenable since even after the defeat of the LTTE, the Tamil speaking population of Sri Lanka will not disappear and nor will the other minorities considered at the outset of this essay. Indeed, a Tamil speaking minority remains in the West of Sri Lanka even if there were to be a partition, as a Sinhalese one may remain in the "second" state as Sri Lanka.

But the emergence of a consensus or devolution among the Sinhalese parties, not uncontested nor free from its own risks of breakdown, indicates that after fifty years of independence, the project of defining Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist island (i.e. language and religion and territory) has been seen as impossible - the debate around the devolution packages still has its partition edges (hence the difficulty of obtaining 2/3 vote for it in Parliament) but there is this recognition of an impossible nationhood. The difficulty now is of discovering a viable and stable alternative.

A precondition required for the emergence of an alternative (i.e. realistic consideration of any one of several proposed solutions) is a *recognition by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army that there is no way of winning the war and obtaining the political objective of nationhood desired*. We are some way from this recognition yet. The breakdown of the latest round of negotiations between the Kumaratunga government and the LTTE after the utmost progress in negotiations to date, show that there is a feeling on the part of the LTTE that it can win Eelam militarily and/or that by entering and completing bilateral negotiations on any package whatsoever which is on offer will mean an objective not achieved. Similarly, the Sri Lankan Army believes it can exhaust and defeat LTTE and regain control over Jaffna and other LTTE territory and restore peaceful conditions.

There is an asymmetry here which renders a consideration of alternatives difficult. The army of a sovereign state cannot cede territory without a military defeat. A guerilla army of a putative state can cease hostilities and settle a war and even claim victory if some of its objectives are met. There have been settlements in El Salvador and Guatemala of longlasting civil wars. Current compromises in Northern Ireland imply a recognition by Sinn Fein and its military counterpart - the provisional IRA - that their objective of a United Ireland is not (pro tem?) achievable. The rights of the Catholic minority will however be guaranteed if and when there is a settlement of the issue, hopefully by May 1998.

When we speak of a settlement of the crisis, it is useful to note that the present period is within a process started in 1995, by Chandrika Kumaratunga. This was an offer of a new Constitution which led to extensive negotiations which were then halted when there were new LTTE attacks in Colombo and elsewhere. Since these attacks, there is a military thrust to gain back Jaffna and resettle it on part of the Sri Lankan Army. The LTTE considers itself still at war. It is possible to take the view that a successful recovery of Jaffna and its resettlement by the former residents is a precondition for the reopening of talks on the devolution process. This is certainly the logic behind the current military effort.

If, however, recovery and resettlement of Jaffna leave the LTTE free to open up attacks on new fronts in the North & East or elsewhere via terrorist attacks, the devolution effort will never take off. This is because the civil war is such that neither side can win and neither side will surrender or even give up the fight. So an alternative must be found. The roots of the alternative solution lie back in the history of Sri Lanka. It is the lack of an inclusive constitution making process which seems to me to be at the bottom of the present crisis. A combination of Parliament and Pacts has been tried and failed. External interaction to broker the crisis with military force (IPUF) has also failed. Unilaterally the majority community has upped its devolution offer from the first pact of 1957 to the current constitutional proposals. This has also now failed.

The problem common to all the failed attempts is that the majority community *offers* unilaterally various concessions. The real need is to start a multilateral, inclusive, symmetric process which, starting from the unsatisfactory present situation, will end in a constitution jointly made by all the people of Sri Lanka. Such a process will include not only the government and the LTTE but opposition parties as well as representatives of the other minorities - Muslims, Burghers in an inclusive way. The process is the solution, or at least the essential core of any viable solution. The process will not start with a draft Constitution "given" by the majority. Constitution making is the healing, nation rebuilding process. What should have happened in the 1950's around the debate on the language issue can happen now, several thousand dead bodies later in the late 1990's. It is only within such a process that the legitimate aspirations of the Tamils as well as all other groups can be expressed. The very recognition that there are a number of groups in Sri Lanka beside the Sinhala Buddhist majority group, which have as much right as the majority to having national identities and must be accommodated within any notion of Sri Lankan nationhood is the essence of the solution.

Thus Sri Lanka has to get back to where this essay started. Sri Lanka has to recognise internally and endogenously that it is a country of four religions, three languages and six regions. Cutting this three dimensional cake along any particular axis - religion or language generate unhappy anomalies. Thus Muslims of the West and the South are not the same as those of the East. Similarly, for the Tamils there has been for a long time and there is now more than one party

which can claim to represent them. This makes it important not to miss out any one of the various "cells" which have a minimal size. If they choose to knit in various umbrella coalitions during the process, so be it. But *ex ante* no such coalitions should be presumed. It is by acknowledging the separateness of as many cells as possible that a genuine and binding unity will occur.

References

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