

SRI LANKA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY FROM QUIETUDE TO CRISES

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Sri Lanka's process of change and transformation during the past one hundred years may be summed up in one phrase: from colonial quietude to post-colonial crises. It has been a century of many gains for the island's people in economic, social and political spheres. It has also been a century that ends with an uncertain future for the country's politics.

When Sri Lanka entered the twentieth century, the colonial transformation under the British rule had been well under way. In many ways Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was known then, represented a picture totally in contrast with that of the colonial sub-continent. It was an island of considerable social peace and relative economic prosperity. There were no signs of militant or mass resistance to the British colonial rule. An indigenous elite loyal to Queen Victoria and an impoverished peasantry with no rebellious instincts had made the island of Ceylon a small jewel in the Crown.

Economy and Society

At the beginning of the twentieth century, an export-oriented plantation economy had been firmly established in the island. The production and export of tea, rubber and coconut products constituted the mainstay of the new economic activity. While the central highlands of the island had been brought under large tea plantations, owned by European capital, the midlands and the coastal districts had been converted into rubber and coconut plantations. Newly emerged local entrepreneurs had their economic interests in rubber and coconut. New urban centers, mainly Colombo and Galle with their port facilities for export trade, emerged to facilitate export processing and commercial activities of the new colonial capitalism. The peasant economy remained largely at a subsistence level. In the absence of a system of big landlordism similar to the *zamindari* system in some parts of India, there were hardly any structural conditions to propel peasant insurgencies. The fact that the colonial administration did not consider the peasant economy as a major source of income through taxation also contributed to a quiet countryside under the British colonial rule.

Politically, Ceylon was a stable colony at the turn of the century. There was no social unrest or resistance to the colonial rule. The last native resistance had occurred as far back as in 1848 in the central highlands. The only sphere of some agitation was among Sinhalese-Buddhist middle-classes of urban origins, who resented the Christian missionary activities among Buddhists. Indeed, in the second half of the 19th century, a Sinhalese-Buddhist intellectual move-

ment had developed, setting in motion seeds of a potentially radical anti-colonial movement. Led by Buddhist priests and lay intelligentsia, this movement had actively engaged Christian missionaries in religious debates, launched a Buddhist educational movement, revived Sinhalese-Buddhist literature and set in motion a native cultural revival. But it had hardly challenged colonial rule in political terms. Indeed, in the absence of an anti-colonial political cutting edge, the early dynamism of the Sinhalese-Buddhist intellectual movement had largely dissipated when the twentieth century began.

The colonial state had an administrative system, centralized in Colombo and presided over by a Governor representing the crown. The top echelons of the colonial bureaucracy were British civil servants. They were assisted by a local network of bureaucrats, recruited from among different strata of the indigenous elite. This local class of administrators, generously compensated by the colonial state by means of cheap land and honorary titles, acted as an effective buffer between masses of the people and the colonial state.

Social Change

The social transformation that had occurred in Ceylon at the dawn of the twentieth century was an integral consequence of the economic changes of the 19th century. With the expansion of the plantation economy, opportunities for capital accumulation had been opened up for enterprising individuals of the local society. By the mid-19th century, the forerunners of a new native capitalist class were already on the horizon and by the end of that century, an entirely new local elite had emerged with strong links to plantation agriculture, speculative capital and the colonial state. Below the landed-capitalist elite was an expanding array of social strata of a middle class, mostly concentrated in the Western and Southern coastal districts. Many of them came from among employees of the colonial administration and mercantile firms and from professional classes of lawyers, notaries and doctors. The expansion of English education, particularly through Christian missionary schools, enabled them to rise above their traditional social backgrounds. Indeed, many of the modern indigenous intelligentsia that had been active in the early twentieth century had been drawn from this lower stratum of the middle class.

The working class, meanwhile, was an ethnically mixed social group that had emerged along with the expansion of the government's services sector and the plantation economy. In the absence

of industrialization under colonialism, there was hardly any industrial working-class in Sri Lanka, except the workers employed in the ports, the railway, export processing industries in tea, rubber and coconut. In Colombo, among the port and municipal workers was migrant labour from South India, particularly from areas which are today known as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. However, the largest segment of the working class was employed in export agriculture, in tea, rubber and coconut plantations. The majority of them were migrant workers from Southern India, either settled in plantations with their families or as periodically employed contract labour.

Political Change

This quiet picture of a model island in the British colonial empire at the beginning of the century was to change slightly in the second decade. There were three developments of political importance that are nonetheless exceedingly insignificant when compared with the events in Colonial India during the same period. The first was a constitutional agitation for greater representation in the colonial legislature for local elites. The second was a mobilization of the masses against the colonial liquor policy. This agitation took religio-cultural character in the form of a temperance movement, yet it was the first instance in the twentieth century to bring indigenous elites and the masses into an alliance in a political confrontation with the colonial administration. The third was the Sinhalese-Muslim riots of 1915, the first manifestation of ethnic tension that was to take a more sinister character in the later decades involving the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

One of the key political features that slowly evolved in Ceylon during the third and fourth decades of the century was the communal rivalry among leaders of the two main ethnic groups, the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil. Quite ironically, this process began and consolidated itself in a context where the colonial state was being partially democratized through constitutional reform. Indeed, from about 1915 onwards, the politics of colonial Ceylon was to be dominated by two themes: constitutional reform agitation for greater legislative responsibility for local elites and the shaping of Sinhalese-Tamil political rivalry in electoral politics. This was indeed a crucial period during which issues that were to characterize the entire political process of Ceylon for the rest of the century took initial shape. It is quite remarkable that Sinhalese and Tamil political elites failed to form a unified political movement against colonial rule. The schism occurred no sooner than Ceylon National Congress was formed in 1919 as a common platform for political reform. The Congress split in 1921 along Sinhalese-Tamil communal lines and ever since the elites of the two communities viewed constitutional reforms as an ethnic zero-sum game.

However, a development totally unanticipated by most of the political leaders occurred in 1929 when a set of constitutional reform proposals recommended by a commission under the leadership of Lord Donoughmore came out with the idea of granting universal adult franchise to all Ceylonese over 21 years of age. In the Legislative Council debate on the Donoughmore reforms, class and political limitations of the "national" movement became starkly

clear. Most of the Sinhalese and Tamil "national" leaders opposed universal adult franchise. Their extraordinary arguments of anti-democratic male elitism ranged from the evil of giving political power to ignorant and uneducated peasants to absolute madness in inviting women into politics, thereby destroying the unity and well-being of the traditional family. One may read Shyam Selvadurai's recent novel *Cinnamon Gardens* to get a good sense of the comic nature of Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic politics of the elite during this period.

Meanwhile, the Donoughmore reforms, passed in the Legislative Council in 1929 with a bare majority of one vote, were to have a far reaching impact on subsequent political developments in Ceylon. The universal franchise gave the silent, illiterate masses an opportunity to take part in national politics, thereby inaugurating a process which we may call today democratic modernity. It is remarkable that the Sri Lankan masses, men and women of all classes, got the democratic privilege of indiscriminatory franchise, just two years after their counterparts in imperial Britain got it. But the Ceylonese nationalist leaders, a thin stratum of the urban notables, were afraid of even partial democratization of the colonial state through representative democracy. But the Donoughmore constitution of 1931 opened up the political system under the colonial state in two distinct directions. With universal franchise, representative democracy and legislative and executive responsibility exercised by members of the Legislative Council, a great deal of social legislation came to be enacted. Indeed, Sri Lanka's extensive social welfare system, one reason for which the British colonial rule is still remembered in Sri Lanka with some nostalgia, was inaugurated in the early years of the Donoughmore constitutional government. Free education, extensive health-care, aid to the poor, infra-structural development, state support for the rural peasantry and state subsidies for low income groups were ingredients of this public policy of welfarism which brought Sri Lanka to fame in decades to come in terms of social development.

The other direction in which Ceylonese politics developed after 1931 was the further polarization of Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic politics. It is an irony of democratic modernity in Sri Lanka that universal franchise directly created conditions for the ethnicization of representative politics. Sinhalese and Tamil political elites, in order to obtain voter support and legitimacy, began to appeal to communal interests of each community, thereby making communal identity an integral component of democratic political competition. In the Legislative Council, the Sinhalese leaders, using their numerical majority managed in 1936 to exclude all minority political representatives from the Council of Ministers, further deepening the existing Sinhalese-Tamil chasm. Indeed, during the two decades prior to Independence of 1948, Ceylon's political elite wasted all their political energies to outwit each other in their dealings with the colonial state and the electorate, instead of forging a unified front against the colonial rule.

This in a way sets the background against which Ceylon was "granted" independence by the British in 1948. Unlike in the Indian sub-continent, in Ceylon there was no mass-based national independence movement. In all social fronts, there were no militant

social upheavals either. The rural peasantry was quite content with the paternalistic policies of the colonial state. Only the Left put forward a radical program for an anti-imperialist struggle, but the Left's impact on mass politics was not strong enough to generate a great anti-colonial movement. Meanwhile, in the early 1940s, Ceylonese political leaders were busy trying to convince the colonial office in London that they were mature enough to undertake the responsibilities of governing the colony. They indeed pleaded with the colonial office for self-government to be granted. Fortunately for them, the imperial government was making up its mind to leave the messy and ungovernable India. Thus came political independence to Ceylon, almost like a gift and as school children are taught, "without shedding a single drop of blood".

After Independence

Sri Lanka's most painful period, however, came in the years after independence. A simple set of demographic statistics, often ignored by analysts, may demonstrate the tragedy of post-colonial Sri Lanka. In the brief period of three decades, beginning in 1970, over 75,000 Sri Lankan citizens have died in political violence and internal war. From 1948 to 1970, the figure of politically-related deaths may not have reached even two hundred. During the entire period of British colonial rule of nearly 150 years, the corresponding number could have been around one thousand. This data of political demography comes from a small island society that has always taken pride in many of its social and political gains, unparalleled in the developing world. Compared with the rest of South Asia, post colonial Sri Lanka has had a near universal rate of adult literacy. Its high level of social development has been an object of envy. It has a comparatively long history of electoral democracy, going as far back as the early 1930s. It continues to have an open and active civil society and a well-developed political party system. Its traditions of parliamentary democracy have been blemished only by the diminishing quality of the members of parliament. Then, why is it that Sri Lanka, the ex-model colony of the British Empire, has become a graveyard of thousands of its citizens in a recurring cycle of violence and rebellion?

The explanation lies largely in the way in which the post-colonial nation-state has been built — or more accurately, unmade — by the Sinhalese ruling elite. The seeds of eventual political disintegration of Sri Lanka were sown within the first decade of political independence when the new ruling elite began to make Sri Lanka a Sinhalese ethnic state by excluding the largest ethnic minority, the Tamils, from the domain of state power. They understood political independence as the return of political sovereignty to Sinhalese nation and made the process of de-colonization one in which the ethnic majority regains its lost place of pride. They failed to understand parliamentary democracy in terms of ethnic pluralism and turned democracy into a majoritarian enterprise. The Tamil political leaders, in turn, responded by demanding a federalist state of power sharing. The post-colonial ruling elite in Sri Lanka has been so ethnically bifurcated that they collectively set in motion a process that has now entered an irrevocable and protracted phase of internal civil war. Post-colonial Sri Lanka in this sense is a paradigmatic example of the failure in modern nation building in a plural society.

During the last three decades of the century, Sri Lanka has also been experiencing a violent rebellion in Sinhalese society. Two insurrections, one in 1971 and the other in 1987-89, were launched by educated, radical Sinhalese youth to capture state power. While both were put down at great human cost, they shattered the illusions of social peace maintained by a society of high educational standards, social welfare and economic re-distribution. This illustrates a paradox in Sri Lanka, which is not seen anywhere else in South Asia. A part of the paradox is the chronic inability of the Sri Lankan economy to gainfully absorb tens of thousands of young men and women who enter the labour force every year after high school and university qualifications.

Indeed, Sri Lanka's recurring political unrest has been largely rooted in the nature of its economy. Until quite recently, no major policy attempt had been made in order to reform and re-structure the economy, the basic framework of which was established by the colonial state early this century. In the first ten years of independence, the economic policy was directed at maintaining the status quo of the colonial economy within a laissez-faire framework. After 1956, a strategy of import-substitution industrialization was followed, along with minor agrarian reforms in the countryside. The state-centric economic development policy, implemented till 1977, generated some industrialization, but not sufficient to propel a rate of growth that could match rising expectations of the children of the welfare state. Massive public investments in rural agriculture also failed to modernize the rural economy, which has been dominated by small-holder peasant farming. Then came economic liberalization of 1977, the first major policy shift in development strategy in South Asia. The new policy thrust was to open up the economy and promote export-oriented manufacturing industry through private foreign investment while the structure of the colonial plantation economy remained virtually intact. The neo-liberal economic dream at the time of liberalization was to make Sri Lanka South Asia's Singapore. But the political mismanagement of the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic problem in the early eighties made that dream well nigh impossible.

Sri Lanka was also the first in South Asia to implement macro-economic reforms under structural adjustment programs in the mid-eighties. These reforms were carried out while the state was fighting two insurgencies, the radical rebellion in the Sinhalese South and the Tamil nationalist separatist war in the North-East. While the ambitious economic growth targets under the new policy regime of market-led economic growth have been stalled by the ever increasing military expenditure, the anticipated shocks of macro economic reform have been minimized by remittances earned by migrant workers of poor and lower-middle class families. A rapid growth in the manufacturing industry has also enabled the state to open up new employment opportunities to youth with secondary school education. However, the rural peasant economy and the plantation economy continue to remain stagnant, with no long-term policy perspectives emerging to address the structural impediments to their economic viability. Only a little talent in political sooth-saying will be required for one to predict another round of volcanic explosions in Sri Lanka. The next time around, it may be centered in two social locations of tremendous despair among the youth, the agrarian countryside and the plantation up country.

But in politics, despite deep internal crises and a protracted civil war, Sri Lanka's democratic institutions have withstood the pressures with remarkable agility. With only occasional setbacks, the country's electoral and democratic processes continue to maintain public trust and confidence. Extra-democratic forces have not yet been able to make deep inroads into the institutions of governance. In constitutional governance though, two major shifts occurred in 1972 and 1978 with lasting consequences for the health of the country's politics. In 1972, Sri Lanka was made a Republic, entrenching the unitary character of the state. It resulted in the political alienation of the Tamil minority whose leaders had agitated for a federalist constitution. The change in 1978, while further entrenching the unitary state amidst Tamil agitation for national self-determination, ended Sri Lanka's tradition of parliamentary democracy of the Westminster model. It introduced a presidential system, akin to the French Gaullist model, turning the parliament subservient to the all-powerful Executive President. Sri Lanka's constitutional debate since the 1980s has been centered on the abolition of the 1978 constitution and returning to the old model of parliamentary sovereignty. But as events during the past five years of the incumbent People's Alliance regime demonstrate, the abolition of this unpopular and highly rigid constitution may require extra-constitutional political measures.

Sri Lanka's present constitutional impasse is located at another important level. It concerns the devolution of power to Tamil majority regions, as a political measure to address Tamil ethnic demands for political autonomy. In the absence of a consensus among Sinhalese ruling elites, a proposal for a federalist constitutional solution, proposed by the present People's Alliance administration, has been put on the back burner. A legacy of eighty years of mistrust, reinforced by mutual feelings of enmity and betrayal during the post-colonial half century, has made it difficult for the two communities to find a middle ground for reconciliation. Indeed, the most bitter legacy of the twentieth century for the people of Sri Lanka is the Sinhalese-Tamil rivalry that began in the early 1920s. Developed into a full scale internal war, this rivalry has been devouring most of the social, political and economic gains made by the Sri Lankan people during this century.

Changes and Choices

Facing a new century and a new millennium, Sri Lanka today is reaping the bitter harvest of the seeds of disintegration sown by its ruling elites. The political leaders thrown up by these elites have been professional politicians and not great statespersons with a vision to galvanize a relatively small, plural society into a modern and well-integrated nation. D. S. Senanayake, the first post-independence Prime Minister who is described as 'the father' of Sri Lanka's independence, set in motion during his tenure the process towards a Sinhala majoritarian nation-state. The next important

political leader was S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who in his brief tenure of three years between 1956 and 1959, succeeded in transforming the social bases of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. He brought into power a social coalition of secondary layers of the Sri Lankan capitalist class and the intermediate classes of Sinhalese society. Bandaranaike probably thought that he was propelling forward a real de-colonization process, but little did he realize that ethnic majoritarian project of decolonization could only marginalize ethnic and religious minorities from the sphere of the state. After he was assassinated in 1959, his wife, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, assumed political leadership, making herself the first woman Prime Minister in the world. With that distinction, she presided over two terms of office in which a project of state-centric capitalism, at times called a kind of socialism, was implemented with full force. But the constitutional changes she introduced in 1972 completed the process of Sinhalese majoritarianism in Sri Lankan politics. Then came the long rule of President J. R. Jayewardene from 1977 to 1988. Jayewardene, known for turning constitutional authoritarianism into a fine practice of political aesthetics, made a Gaullist constitution for Sri Lanka in 1978, transforming the Westminster system of government into one described as an Executive Presidential system. In this new system, almost all powers of the state came to be vested in just one individual, the Executive President. Meanwhile, it has been the most unpleasant political experience of the younger daughter of the Bandaranaiques, Chandrika Kumaratunga who became President in 1994, to fail in extricating Sri Lanka from the abyss created by the actions of all her Prime Ministerial and Presidential predecessors.

It is also an irony in post-independence Sri Lankan politics that two of the most influential contemporary political leaders have emerged from the illegitimate underground of politics. The first is Rohana Wijeweera, who founded the radical Sinhalese *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (People's Liberation Front) in the late 1960s and led two unsuccessful armed insurrections to capture state power, once in 1971 and then in 1987-89. The second person is Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that has been waging a protracted armed struggle for nearly two decades to establish a separate ethnic state for Sri Lankan Tamils.

Facing the next century and the millennium, Sri Lankan citizens were called upon to elect a new president on December 21. But the real historical choice, which all Sri Lankans will have to make within the first few years of the new century, is one of greater complexity. Indeed, the choice will have to be made either in favor of a multi-ethnic, pluralistic, democratic nation-state with decentered and shared sovereignty or of making the country further drift towards two mono-ethnic and hostile political entities. ■

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