

POLITICS OF APHASIA

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On July 25th 1999, Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam was assassinated enroute to his workplace in Colombo. After his death, a wealth of narratives proliferated about his assassination, which was reportedly an act of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). What is known is that his death was swift and brutal, the last act of a suicide bomber. Members of the civil rights community in Sri Lanka will remember Dr. Thiruchelvam for his work on constitutional reform. To the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), he was just a target. To foreign observers, his death was a signal of troubled politics in a faraway land. To me, Dr. Thiruchelvam's death represents the vicious politics of aphasia that trammel the Sri Lankan body politic. A question that has haunted me, whilst trying to understand Sri Lanka, is *what sort of political space and circumstances* contribute towards a politics full of violence?

In August 1994, the Peoples' Alliance (PA) coalition government was elected to office on a peace and reform platform. At that moment in history it seemed possible to imagine an end to protracted conflict. Five years on optimism has faded. The political crisis in Sri Lanka has deepened. Peace talks between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) broke down in April 1995. Hostilities between the two main warring parties resumed. The government voted in on a mandate for peace found itself in the ambivalent position of waging a war for peace. Discourses of diversity and peace increasingly came under attack. The resumption of hostilities re-opened the political space for Sinhala nationalist discourse whilst the government for peace became an increasingly authoritarian regime.

Many writers have explored the crisis in Sri Lanka as a failure of governance. The literature on governance does address some aspects of the crisis and has influenced my thinking. However, the literature on this topic tends to focus on root causes of the conflict or institutional dynamics and fails to address the phenomenology of violence. A more useful research strategy would be to explore the dynamics and consequences of what I term "a politics of aphasia." Aphasia is a disorder of the nervous system, characterized by partial or total loss of the ability to communicate.

In Sri Lanka, the main parties involved in the conflict have been involved in shameful acts of brutality, which has closed down meaningful communication between the parties. In addition, a culture of violence has consolidated itself through propaganda and the demonizing by each side of the other. This culture of violence is not confined to the two warring parties. Bipartisan politics has been infected by political thuggery. Media censorship is key to a politics of aphasia, since without reliable information, rumours and silence open up the space for mythology and symbolism. Various encounters during my research in Sri Lanka highlight the impact of rumour and misinformation in exacerbating essentialist categories such as "Sinhalese-Buddhist" "Tamil" and "the other." I remember a particularly poignant exchange with a shopkeeper following the

Gonagala massacre in September 1999. On September 15th 1999, an airforce bombing killed 23 civilians and injured many others in the Mullaitivu district. In retaliation for the air raid which killed 23 civilians in Puthukkudiyiruppu, Sinhalese villagers were attacked in the Ampara District on September 18th. (The attacks were alleged to have been carried out by the LTTE; they were particularly brutal, including the hacking to death of victims).

Newspapers carried particularly graphic details of the Gonagala massacre. On the evening of September 20th 1999, I was walking down Havelock Road and stopped to drink a *tambili* at a *kaday*. The shopowner was reading a copy of a newspaper with photos of the victims of the Gonagala massacre. As I was drinking he pointed to the photos and said: "You see our problem. Tamils very bad." To this Sinhala-speaking shopkeeper, the moment of violence at Gonagala was reduced in all its complexity to a state versus terrorist problem. In his emotional confrontation with hacked bodies, terrorists had suffered a further slippage into Tamils. Here we can see a clear example of the problems implicit in a climate of censorship.

In comparison to the shopkeeper, I was able to access a wide variety of information sources in order to draw my narrative of the event. I was able to locate the incident in a context of military encounters and problematize the manner in which the victims of the Gonagala massacre received a swift commitment to compensation, whilst the victims of relatives of the Puthukkudiyiruppu attack did not receive secure commitments. I could access internet sources in order to receive information that was not available locally. In contrast, the shopkeeper had to draw his narrative from a particular coverage of the event. No doubt gossip, dialogue and exchange followed the reading of newspaper reports, deepening and complicating readers' relationship to the Gonagala massacre. Nonetheless, in a context of censorship where news coverage of conflict areas is very sparse it becomes easier to maintain the spectacle of the war-event as a state versus terrorist problem.

I would argue that the deepening of the conflict in Sri Lanka is linked to the collapsing of what should be termed a complex political emergency (Lewer & Goodhand: 1999), into a state versus terrorist problem. Political crisis continues as the result of state failure to imagine pluralist citizenship. This is not to deny violent tactics used by the LTTE against its opponents, but an attempt to refocus debate on the need for state re-structuring, and the need for openness in public discourse. State complicity with blaming the terrorists for political crisis is a way of deflecting attention from the government's own inadequacies, and a displacement tactic to silence public criticism.

Dominant anthropological readings of violence in Sri Lanka have tended to be fascinated and fixated on riots to the exclusion of other forms of collective violence (Siriwardena: 1999:1). I am less

interested in exploring specific moments of political violence. My focus whilst conducting research in Sri Lanka was on a regime which encourages a politics of aphasia that sustains the conditions for violence in Sri Lanka.

During my research journeys in Sri Lanka, I had not intended to explore the context of circumstances perpetuating violence. However, a series of encounters underscored the impossibility of avoiding the question of violence when viewing political landscapes. My work does not 'explain' or give meaning to violence, but explores state and other actors' complicity with producing *the conditions for violence*. There are various sites, stages and templates upon which History is constructed as a cultural object. My aim is not to 'explain' violence but to explore a range of 'sights' that either resist or are complicit with a politics of aphasia. This strategy encourages researchers to view the conflict and conflict resolution strategies with an understanding of the power of visual culture. The staging of political events, posters and the use of symbolic sites all sustain a particular imagining of public culture. The manner in which the state comes to define the 'Other' has been critical in fuelling conflict.

In the context of a politics of aphasia, it seems important for academics to give up functional accounts of the conflict and start to approach the myriad maps and meanings which have shaped our understanding of politics, ethnicity and identity in Sri Lanka. Jayadeva Uyangoda notes that: "the progressive literature on ethnicity has produced a rich body of knowledge on the causes of the ethnic conflict, its origins and spread. Rarely (though) has research on ethnicity interrogated the very category of ethnicity, subjecting it to interrogation with regard to its political utility as a basis of political association among a diversity of communities." My intention in developing the concept of a politics of aphasia is to interrogate, to offer an evaluative stance.

The key to an understanding of the consequences of a politics of aphasia is an understanding of the spatial and symbolic strategies of control of the nation-state. During my research journeys in Sri Lanka, I have undertaken readings and visual documentation of various important events during the PA regime of 1994-99, which highlight the interplay of visual political culture and spatial strategies of domination which have eroded the political space for diversity. Understanding the highly visual nature of politics also explains the rise and transformation of President Bandaranaike Kumaratunge from peace-broker to avatar. It may also explain the failure of certain strategies for peace-building if activists are unwilling to shape a new public culture.

As a foreign researcher, I am an 'outsider,' but I can make known my experiences and impressions. The 'reality' of any work done in Sri Lanka is a war situation in which the two main warring parties have consolidated their power. I live in the middle of a 'war-event' which has become in time a kind of twisted normality. The 'war-event' has become a normality to many Sri Lankans. When I use the term 'normality,' I am not attaching any normative presuppositions to this noun. Normality in this text refers to what is regular, common. The stench of violence, the disgust and anger it ought to produce, has faded in Colombo, faded to a whiff of unease in the

humid afternoons. The political space in Sri Lanka is a place where people expect violence to happen.

The 'war-event' has taken on a frightening normality. On January 7th, 2000, a fourteen-hour curfew was imposed on Colombo in order to search for-suspects of a recent bomb attack (*The Island*, 8/1/2000). Unsurprisingly, people are fatigued by the protracted conflict and disillusioned with party politics. In this context, academic talk on agency and resistance or the nature of politics needs to take account of the consequences of a politics of aphasia on the phenomenology of violence. If alternative narratives of the conflict are not produced, then the shopkeeper on Havelock Road will remain restricted by the highly selective coverage of broadsheet news. And the question becomes, "do we engage or become complicit with a politics of aphasia?"

REFERENCES

1. Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam was a human rights activist and Director of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). He was also an MP for the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), founded in 1976. In addition, Dr. Thiruchelvam was a lawyer, a father, a husband, a friend.
2. Aphasia. n. a disorder of the central nervous system characterised by partial or total loss of the ability to communicate, esp. in speech or writing.
3. The current President, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge, is from the SLFP, although she won the 1994 election through the People's Alliance (PA), a coalition receiving support from seven minor parties. These minor parties include the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the Up-Country People's Front representing the plantation Tamils, *Eelam* People's Democratic Party (EPDP), Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil *Eelam* (PLOTE), all three small Tamil parties representing the Northeast.
4. Political violence is increasing. This is not simply the GOSL versus the LTTE. On December 18th 1999 an LTTE suicide bomber exploded at a PA election rally in Colombo killing 26 and injuring the President. On January 5th 2000 another suicide bomb exploded outside the Prime Ministers Office, killing seven. On the same day Mr Kumar Ponnambalam, a Tamil lawyer and pro-LTTE spokesman was shot. A hitherto unknown group claimed responsibility for killing Mr Ponnambalam.
5. Amnesty International condemned both incidents. AI News release ASA 37/22/99.
6. The structure of my research was partly inspired by the work of Allen Feldman (1991). I have built on his work to include 'sights' as well as sites. I think the way we read politics contributes to the articulation or resistance of 'fictive ethnicity'.
7. A range of theoretical approaches have influenced my endeavour. Like T.W Adorno, I am against the premature institution of truth. His method of negative dialectics was an interesting intervention for his time (1979). Today his language appears unwieldy. I prefer to use stories as a method of testing out theories, inspired by feminist philosophy that knowledge is contextual, situated (see Sandra Harding 1990, Rosi Bradiotti, 1991).
8. Jayadeva Uyangoda. 1998., *Research on Ethnicity in Sri Lanka. A Critique from Within*. Unpublished paper. p7.
9. I use the term 'outsider' to denote how I might be perceived in Sri Lanka. Yet where does the outside end and the inside begin? I am also a documentalist, a witness, an actor and part of the swarm in Sri Lankan scapes. The point of noting that I am seen as an 'outsider' is to be aware of context and the nature of the gaze. ■

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