

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The Question of the 'Unitary State'

Arguments against the government's devolution package which has been presented as a solution to the ethnic question have a very peculiar character: they are a repetition of the same arguments that have been repeatedly re-cycled by generations of Sinhalese nationalist intellectuals since the mid-fifties. These arguments revolve around two key formulations: "Division of the country," and the "betrayal of the Sinhalese nation."

The fear of division emanates from the notion of the 'unitary state' which is also the master image of the Sri Lankan polity, as understood in Sinhala nationalist ideology. A unitary state is the political concomitant of a Sinhala-Buddhist society. Thus, any slight deviation from the unitary state is immediately denounced and resisted by Sinhalese nationalist intellectuals as amounting to a division of the country.

However, the notion of the unitary state — so emotionally evocative and central to the Sinhalese nationalist world view — has a relatively brief history in Sri Lanka's political vocabulary. It is in fact a post-colonial constitutionalist doctrine, with a distinctly colonial genealogy and it came into currency for the first time in the early 1950s. Its initial popularization can, ironically, be credited to Tamil nationalists of the Federal Party who, a few years after independence, began to question the unitary character of the Soulbury Constitution and to agitate for a federal polity.

The facts of history may not be of much help in reflecting objectively on contemporary problems, particularly when ethnic emotions over land and country are more powerful than reason. However, if we summon the recorded history of Sri Lanka to bear witness to the country's current political predicament, history will show us that the unitary state in the island was primarily been a colonial creation. The administrative unification and political centralization of the entire island by the British in 1833 was the starting point of Sri Lanka's unitary state in the modern sense.

Until then, the island was generally, with a few exceptional periods, an ensemble of a number of sovereign or semi-sovereign political entities, with no administrative or military centre. Stanley Tambiah uses the concept of a 'galactic polity' to describe this precolonial states system in Sri Lanka, a characteristic of South India too. The few exceptional periods were the reigns of powerful kings, described specifically in the chronicles as having brought the country "under the sovereignty of one umbrella". It is this history that is ignored by nationalist intellectuals when they fervently assert that Sri Lanka has been a unitary state since the time of Dutugemunu.

Talks and Cease-fire

As we note elsewhere, the PA government has not yet communicated officially with the LTTE about the political package. Judging by the statements of government leaders, there are two major reasons for this reluctance to send the package to the LTTE. Firstly, the government appears to think that post-package political dynamics would considerably weaken the LTTE and therefore it is not necessary to invite them to be a party to the new political process. Secondly, there is a grave apprehension that the LTTE would try to manipulate or subvert the new process by demanding a cease-fire and agreeing to serious talks about the package, which they would then drag out in the usual way.

The prospect of another cease-fire — or cessation of hostilities, as the particular terminology goes — with the LTTE is viewed with great alarm in the South. This is quite understandable given negative experiences in the past. The LTTE always made use of the previous cease-fire situations to strengthen itself militarily. During the peace talks with the PA government, the LTTE wasted no time in re-consolidating its military presence in the Eastern Province.

Suppose, however, that the LTTE and the government want to resume talks, to discuss the package unveiled by the government, should such a prospect be negated because of the deep mistrust that the two parties entertain about each other? Not necessarily. One of the axiomatic principles in conflict resolution is to recognize the existing reality and work on the basis of the parameters of that reality. Mutual distrust between the government and the LTTE — the two parties to the conflict — is a part of the reality which is not likely to be changed for quite some time to come. Then, why shouldn't some contacts, let alone substantive talks, be resumed on the package, accepting that reality of mistrust? Mutual trust and confidence are now of course distant goals to be achieved some day; yet even to work towards that goal, some contacts and communication between the two parties are essential.

And in taking these initial steps, no party should unduly worry about a cease-fire. Prudence requires that even in situations of bitter war, parties maintain political contacts and communication. In Sri Lanka today, such prudence remains an illusion.

War, Peace and the Political Package

As we argued in our last editorial, the government's propaganda formulation - 'a war for peace' is a thoroughly contradictory one, that also puts the government's own commitment to a negotiated political settlement in ques-

tion. The government's self-induced political trap, inherent in this propagandist strategy, is becoming alarmingly visible in the context of the political package.

The political essence of the package is that it should constitute the framework for a negotiated settlement. However, when the government continues to talk about a war against the LTTE and peace with the Tamil people, it merely confuses both the Tamil and Sinhalese people. For the Tamil people in Jaffna, to whom the government projects itself as the liberator, the continuing war provides no respite for reflection, dialogue and or the making of political choices. Jaffna, with severe shortages of food and medicine, and subject to the ravages of war, is perhaps the last place whose populace can conceivably trust the government's promise of liberation.

For the Sinhalese people, who are constantly bombarded with neo-patriotic racist propaganda, the 'war for peace' can hardly be confused with any political packages. The use of a peace rhetoric to justify war ultimately justifies not peace, but the war.

Other implications of the government's stated objective in its current offensive are also disturbing, in particular the objective of 'liberating the Tamil people from the LTTE'.

What does this rhetoric imply? In arrogating to itself a right to liberate the Tamils, the Sri Lankan state declares that it is still a Sinhala hegemonic state deciding what is good for the ethnic minorities. It declares that it refuses to recognise the right of other ethnic groups to determine their own future. It refuses to recognise, in effect, the multi-ethnic reality of Sri Lankan society.

Unless the state is purged of this attitude, no structure of devolution, however framed in theory and law, can be actualised so as to satisfy the aspirations of minority ethnic groups.

A great necessity is thus the decommunalisation of the Sri Lankan state. This a paramount task without whose fulfilment peace within a single state would be unachievable.

SUBALTERN STUDIES CONFERENCE IN COLOMBO

The fifth bi-annual 'Subaltern Studies' conference was held in Colombo from the 2nd to the 4th of August. Organized jointly by the Social Scientists' Association and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, it attracted a wide group of scholars working on South Asian issues. Representing the subalternist collective were Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Spivak.

The collective, of course, has been dominated by historians; and the dominant thrust of its work has been the interrogation of colonialist and nationalist historiography of India from an alternative Marxist perspective. What was striking about this conference was the deployment of the insights of Subaltern Studies by a younger generation of anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, literary critics — and historians — to interrogate the literature on post-colonial South Asian history. In other words, the conference was not only a truly South Asian intellectual event; it also demonstrated the continuing relevance of the subalternist paradigm for the further understanding of the way we comprehend events in our countries.

Papers on Indian topics discussed the following subjects: gender, nationalism and cinema; space and Hindu nationalism; colonial urban planning; nationalism and the fiction of partition; feminism and the law; the representation of witchcraft; and, multi-culturalism in rural areas. The Sri Lankan papers were on: the Mothers' Front and women's agency; nationalism, violence and masculinity in Sri Lanka; nationalism and Sinhala historiography; re-evaluating the Donoughmore reforms; questions around Tamil nationalism; and, a 19th century woman poet.

As evident from above, most of the papers dealt with issues pertaining to nationalism. Indeed, some of them provoked serious re-thinking of the way we perceive social phenomena. Consequently, the discussions following the papers were always spirited, and sometimes quite heated. One could, therefore, call the conference a resounding success.

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