

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.

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## 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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