

MONOPOLY OF PATRIOTISM: A PERSONAL ESSAY ON INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

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If one has been reading Sinhala and English language newspapers over the past few years, one would have noticed that the idea of "patriotism" has become a major theme in contemporary ideological debates and polemics. In these debates, the concept of patriotism has been narrowly defined, and become a potent weapon in the hands of people who have easy access to the local print media. As a weapon it is primarily used for purposes of vilification and exclusion. In this brief essay I would attempt to understand how and why this situation has come about, how this situation affects me as an individual, while questioning some of the premises that underlie this parochial rendition of patriotism.

What is Patriotism?

What exactly is 'patriotism', which recurs so often in Sri Lankan politics, academic debates and popular discourse? Samuel Johnson in 1775 claimed that "patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel." The second edition of Webster's New Universal Dictionary defines it as follows: "Love and loyal or zealous support of one's own country, especially in all matters involving other countries;" (1983). What are the contours of "patriotism" as expressed in Sinhala society today (Hopefully, someone will enlighten us about what is today considered as Tamil patriotism)?

Is "patriotism" such a simple and coherent idea that would be universally perceived and accepted by all individuals in a given society, or for that matter in all human societies? Or is it a much more complex concept than what is commonly assumed, which would lead to a variety of uses and abuses? Even the manner in which the concept is perceived in Sinhala society is quite different from Webster's definition, or Johnson's wisecrack. For example, the Sinhala-English dictionary (1981) edited by Sirisena Maitipe defines the concepts *jatimamatwaya* and *jatyalaya* as the love for one's ethnic group or race, and "patriotism" is given as the English translation for both words. The connotations of love for one's country in Webster's definition is absent in Maitipe's formal Sinhala dictionary rendition, and is replaced by the love for one's ethnic or racial group. However, in Malalasekera's *English-Sinhala Dictionary* (1988), patriotism is translated into Sinhala as *swadeshalya*, or the love for one's own land or country. Here all ethno-racial connotations of the word are completely absent.

Whatever formations formal dictionary definitions may take, what ultimately matters is the nature of popular perception. In popular Sinhala perception patriotism combines the notions of loving one's country, ethnic or racial group as well as religion. In terms of this popular perception, largely constructed by the print media, anyone who is deemed not to love her country, ethnic or racial group or religion is considered unpatriotic or *jatidrohi*. However, the problem is that in most cases, this idea is presented in antagonistic and polemical ethno-religious terms.

In Sinhala society, as anywhere else, what is perceived as patriotism manifests in a number of different ways. Thus I would suggest that within a broad framework of general understanding there ideally would be different variations or meanings of patriotism, depending on people's individual interests, backgrounds, and capabilities. Whatever specific linguistic problems that may arise, we cannot legitimise some meanings at the expense of others. Thus what I consider parochial and exclusionist definitions also have a right to exist. However, I as an individual or others as individuals have no obligations to accept such definitions and mould our lives or outlooks around them. As such, in this article I would use "patriotism" in a manner that would combine a number of meanings. Or simply, patriotism should really be patriotisms.

Monopoly of Patriotism and the Process of Exclusion

The existence of such variations in the manifestation of patriotism is not recognised by those self-professed patriots who regularly decide others are not patriotic. They simply decide what they perceive as patriotism, and assume that others should fit into that model. Those who do not will be castigated as unpatriotic. This is clearly an exercise in inclusion and exclusion: the self-professed patriots exclude those who do not fit into their model of patriotism as not merely unpatriotic, but also as conspirators, spies, and irreligious or de-cultured louts. The process of exclusion does not merely end there. In most cases it goes to the extent of demonizing or stripping off the humanity of the excluded. A simple, but nevertheless a highly unrealistic, polemical and dangerous formula. This is a recurrent phenomenon in Sri Lankan politics as well as in certain debates involving "sensitive" issues such as religion, ethnicity, nationalism, history, and so on.

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The most likely scenario under which the persona of the unpatriotic would be constructed, and routinely vilified, would be somewhat as follows: the self-professed patriots would read or hear about something they dislike or do not understand, and would decide immediately that the ideas expressed were unpatriotic. They would also decide that those who expressed such (“unpatriotic”) ideas are worthy of vilification. Such vilification comes naturally since they are already excluded from humanity as well as from the group of those deemed truly patriotic. Many of those who criticise others as unpatriotic would tout themselves as the true patriots, and would further contend that true patriotism is increasingly a scarce resource, and only they have the real stuff. Moreover, many of these highly patriotic folks have access to influential sections of the local print media engaged in parochial nationalist or ultra nationalist discourse. In the columns of such newspapers very little or no space is allocated to the ideas of those who are considered unpatriotic. Clearly the process of exclusion is quite complete.

In many ways this patriotic-unpatriotic dichotomy (Us vs. Them) was evident in many of the newspapers that provided space for the debate that ensued after “exposing” Stanley Tambiah’s book, *Buddhism Betrayed?* A consistent theme in many of the articles of Tambiah’s admittedly problematic book was that every one who disagreed with the self-professed patriots were not simply unpatriotic, but were enemy agents paid in dollars by “Jewish Foundations” for the singular task of discrediting and wiping out the Sinhala people and Buddhism.

Assessing my Patriotism?

Why should someone else decide on the legitimacy of my patriotism? I would rather do it myself. After all, I have plenty of free education (thanks to Mr. Kannangara’s foresight) as well as paid education to figure that out. I am a Sinhala, a Buddhist and a citizen of Sri Lanka. Some of these self-professed patriots who assess my patriotism actually reside in other parts of the world. From these safe havens some of them publish “newspapers” asserting their patriotism towards the country and people they have left behind. Mind you, migration is a human endeavour, and has been so for millions of years. One should not criticise these people for migrating to more prosperous parts of the world, which is clearly a very rational economic decision. Interestingly, however, neither the dubious nature of such remote control patriotism nor the exclusionist nature of the more dominant local variety is seldom suspect or questioned.

Instead what is questioned (mostly) is the patriotism of those who elected to stay behind and express relatively independent opinions or those who decided for some obscure reason to return to this country despite the clearly hostile reception of their ideas and opinions. For example, how would the self-professed patriots answer the fol-

lowing question: Why did these people (the excluded ones) come back to the country or elect to stay behind? For patriotic reasons? Absolutely no way. They must be agents of CIA, Mossad or Jewish Foundations (whatever these may be!). Interestingly, they are never accused of being agents of the British MI 5, which I suppose is a manifestation of our own colonized frame of mind. Surely, anything from the old colonial masters could not be so bad.

On the other hand, none of the self-professed patriots ever bothers to ask the others what their views on such issues as nationalism, ethnicity, religion etc., are. In a sense, why should they? Who would want to ask such important questions from people whose very humanity has been questioned, whose existence has been demonized? The two types of patriots never engage in debates devoid of inherent hostilities. Most of those who are considered unpatriotic by the self-proclaimed patriots on their part do not articulate their views in a language or medium that the average folks would have access to. This discommunication, or the inability to communicate, is part of the problem. So their ideas are mostly perceived by the masses not on the basis of their own merit, but on the basis of re-definitions provided by the self-proclaimed patriots. Such problems have made the process of exclusion and inclusion relatively easy to initiate and maintain. Once the process of exclusion is initiated by one group, the other goes on to maintain it. Thus in practical terms, the processes of inclusion and exclusion are maintained by both groups.

Patriotism and Dissent

Dissent, I believe, is clearly symbolic of patriotism. It seems to me that all “patriots” have a right to dissent when they are convinced that certain actions or dominant ideologies prevalent in the wider society are unfair or problematic. Patriotism does not mean that individuals in a society have to be clones of a master human person—the “True Patriot”. As I mentioned earlier, my Buddhist and Sinhala identities are well entrenched, and I have no intention to hide these. But if I state in a local newspaper or in an international forum (the dollars once again!) that the human rights situation in Sri Lanka is appalling, that is a statement of fact: people have disappeared without a trace; very little has been done by the state to find out what happened to them; others have been murdered; many are poverty stricken while others are talking about some nonsense called NIC status in year 2000. The public expression of what I see as reality cannot strip me of my Sinhalaness or my Buddhistness. On the contrary, it reinforces those twin identities and my own kind of patriotism.

A part of my childhood socialization in Buddhist ethics strongly inculcated by some of the most prominent Buddhist schools in the country never suggested (as far as I can remember) that I should accept the dominant ideas



prevalent in society if they had no basis in fact or reality. Such a notion would in fact amount to a clear violation of some of the most profound words of the Buddha himself as contained in the *Kalama Sutta*. Buddhist tradition in general offers the best guidelines for intellectual debate and inquiry offered by any religious tradition. This may be a manifestation of my own Buddhist bias, but that is a bias I can live with, and a bias I shall always defend. Let me quote the question posed by the *Kalamas* and the Buddha's replies as stated in *Kalama Sutta*:

Question:

There are some monks and brahmins, venerable sir, who visit Kesaputta. They explain and expound only their doctrines, the doctrines of others they despise, revile and pull to pieces. Venerable sir, there is doubt, there is uncertainty in us concerning them, "which of these reverend monks and brahmins spoke the truth and which falsehood.

Answer:

It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour, nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "the monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourself know: These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill, abandon them. (Soma Thera, 1981:5-6, emphasis added.)

It would thus seem that questioning what is doubtful is perfectly in tune with Buddhist ethics. Expressing new ideas and discarding what is problematic is also quite compatible with such ethics. What is not compatible is the vilification of persons with whom one does not agree. Given these circumstances, I would argue that dissent should be considered one of the most important indicators of patriotism. Thus the Buddhist and Christian priests who visited the war-torn northern areas were not being unpatriotic, but simply attempting to turn around a situation that was simply incompatible with what their religions teach. Similarly, those who critically assess our collective past are attempting to place in perspective new knowledge that would allow us to understand the past better. They cannot be any more unpatriotic than those who criticise them aggressively, attempting to strip them of their patriotism and humanity. If such ideas and actions are perceived to be radically different from the views expressed by the society at large, they may be considered manifestations of dissent but not manifestations of lack of patriotism.

Self-Proclaimed Patriots and Public Opinion

Who exactly are the people who decide, for whatever purposes, that some of their compatriots are unpatriotic and that they are conspiring to destabilize the country? The conspiracy mentality is not alien to our culture. It manifests itself in politics and socio-economic spheres when these spheres are under stress. Such stresses may be the result of international or national socio-economic conditions. Economically and socially Sri Lankan society as a whole probably has never been under so much stress in recent times as it is currently experiencing. The corruption in politics, internal contradictions in income distribution, allowing multi-nationals and local business interests unlimited exploitation of human and natural resources, and similar phenomena as a whole directly construct situations leading to heightened stress. Under such conditions everything and everyone can be suspect. Public officials, minorities, religious leaders with a different point of view, scholars, and NGOs can all be viewed with suspicion. It is under conditions such as these that the social construction of the unpatriotic begins.

The point, however, is to ascertain whether the persona of the unpatriotic individual or organization thus constructed is accepted as such by the masses. As far as I can see, such universal acceptance is not quite visible. All we can see is the manner in which these individuals are socially constructed as unpatriotic through the print media. So to a large extent what we see are merely the ideas of a predominantly middle class and urban-based group of people who have relatively easy access to newspapers. Thus in the initial stages the persona of the unpatriotic is not so much socially constructed, but created by newspapers. Over a period of time such ideas may be accepted by most members of the wider society and thus be socially legitimized. But until then, the middle class perception presented in the newspapers is hardly symbolic of the larger reality.

Therefore, when various citizens from the South who visited the war-torn Northern Province were branded as unpatriotic, many others whose voices are not heard but who have nevertheless been closely affected by the violence thought otherwise. Despite the fact that such visits yielded no tangible results, many soldiers and parents of soldiers and police officers who had died in combat stated in interviews that such visits were useful and should continue. A letter written by a police officer in LTTE captivity published in a Sinhala language newspaper expressed a similar idea. Clearly then, for many voiceless people the actions and opinions of those who are branded in sections of the national press as unpatriotic are really not so. For them, dissent is really not dissent but common sense.

Finally, I would like to conclude these inconclusive thoughts by stating that Samuel Johnson was quite wrong



when he said that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. At least as far as the Sri Lankan situation is concerned, it would seem that patriotism of the kind touted by sections of the national press is the first and only refuge for a multitude of middle class scoundrels who

have forgotten the best of their own heritage. For my part, I treat these people with *karuna* and *mettha* as the Buddha himself had preached. And my patriotism is still intact even though I may be excluded.

DISCUSSION IN DISSENT

Lucien Rajakarunanayake

My choosing of today's subject "Discussion in Dissent" is an effort, however limited, to draw attention to the overriding limitations to dissent that exist in our society. In a sense it is a reaction to the evasion of discussion, the refusal to discuss, and the satisfaction in letting problems remain unsolved, if not being made worse, by shutting out the windows to new, varied and different opinion.

We live in times when the intellectual is often the deliberate target of vilification. There is a popular thesis which at present heaps scorn on the individual, whether intellectual or not, for the mere advocacy of minority rights. For all our claims, there seems to be a refusal to accept even a change in individual opinion on public issues, without vilification for previously held views.

These attitudes, I believe, flow from the deep-seated lack of appreciation of dissent and a largely held belief that nothing but good, albeit with minor warts, could come from the dominant view, the prevailing position, the status quo, be it in government, social organization or political process.

We are today in the midst of what appears to be a new political ferment. If we can, even with difficulty, ignore the tragi-comedy of self-centered politics which we see on both sides of the so-called political divide, one cannot ignore the fact that we are indeed at a new cross-roads of our social and political organization. But, what is the nature and content of discussion of the new realities that take place today? To the concerned observer, the answer would be a sad lacuna.

It is unfortunate that dissent, in our country, remains largely in the domain of the political parties - parties which, within themselves, allow for very little discussion, as seen over and over again in the internal conflicts that reach the limelight. Parties, adopt policies without even the semblance of discussion, but solely for the purpose of harvesting votes or harvesting goods and favours for their members, supporters and kith and kin.

We are supposedly in the midst of a great debate about the direction of our economic thrust - the oft-quoted race for the celebration of NIC status. We are full of the great

benefits of a market-oriented economy. We hear constant reference to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the failure of the Socialist / Communist system. The private sector is the darling of the decade. The public sector is the demon, to be wished away through the exorcism of legislation. But listen to the din, and try to discover whether there is serious discussion as to how the new trends can really help our people, our society, the new generations with a whole range of new expectations. What we find, in real terms, is a threatening silence.

Or, take our political system itself. The Executive Presidency is a concern of a great many who have watched with alarm the erosion of the democratic process in Sri Lanka. There was the time of the impeachment motion and its aftermath, during which time every political party, including the one which introduced the system, made statements about the need to change it. But beyond vague statements, made with the headline in mind, where do we see any serious discussion of the subject? Not even in the political parties which promise more than the moon in the matter of political change.

Instead of the great public debate which should be generated on the subject, through political parties, newspapers, academic centres, professional organizations, trade unions, human rights and community organizations, what one discovers is a tuneless chorus, lacking in depth, about the need to change the system, but not discussion on the methodology of the change or what we should have in its stead. Each section of society which should take a lead in the discussion appears to have abdicated its responsibility; there is a total void where there should have been informed exchange of views.

The situation is reduced to farce when those who were once the most ardent advocates of an immediate end to the Executive Presidency, now say, when again close to its warm and enriching rays, that it need not be done away with so soon. The farce is made more unendurable, when the other side which promises to have nothing to do with the system, offers a candidate for the Presidency whose sole purpose, it appears, is to abolish it, and that is all. What of the future we may ask. But who dares question?

This is the text of the K.Kanthisamy Memorial Lecture, delivered in June 1994. Lucien Rajakarunanayake, Senior Journalist, is with the Free Media Movement.

