

PEACE, LTTE AND TAMIL INTELLECTUALS

Sasanka Perera

In a sense, this essay will not have much coherence. It cannot be otherwise, since my thoughts on the issues I want to address are not yet quite coherent. What follows then are merely some observations, which I believe need to be addressed, and addressed now.

My basic concern is the relative silence of Tamil intellectuals based in Sri Lanka (or elsewhere) regarding the violent politics of the LTTE in the context of the peace process initiated by the new government. More particularly, I am referring to the manner in which these individuals look, or do not look, at violence within Tamil society, particularly involving the LTTE. Such endeavours, to be of any real practical use, must be undertaken by members of Tamil society, particularly by those who have access to different shades of public opinion among Tamils in the North and East.

I initially thought about writing an article addressing these issues a few months ago, when it appeared that, irrespective of their abilities and access to the print and electronic media, many colleagues and friends I asked to undertake such a venture simply did not do it. While agreeing with me on the necessity of such regular public interventions, many found their impenetrable middle class ramparts useful to hide behind. Yet I still hesitated, due to certain polemical interpretations some people were likely to offer and the sensitivity of the subject matter I wanted to address.

As far as I am concerned, my Sinhaleanness or Buddhistness is not a problem. The problem is that within the parochial limitations of the nationalist discourse of both Tamils and Sinhalese, constructive dissent or criticism is usually not tolerated - particularly by sections of the middle class with access to the national press. Part of the problem is that I do not have the time to respond to such polemical comments. However, such a situation of self-censorship cannot endure, and should not. Within the parameters of these limitations, a critical look at Sinhala society would make me a traitor. Similarly, a critical look at Tamil society would make me a racist among some Tamils but a darling among ultra-nationalist sections of Sinhalese. In both cases, my observations would be taken out of context. The former label has already been used to describe me, but not the latter. This essay could probably be the beginning of that process as well!

I must confess, however, that I received a much needed motivation to complete this article from Rajan Hoole's recent intervention in the *Sunday Times* of 6th November 1994. That was the kind of intervention I had in mind. That is also the kind of intervention I hope to see more often in the future. But these interventions have to go beyond the English language

print media to reach the wider Sinhala society. Like average Tamils, it would be the average Sinhalese who would truly benefit from peace. It is their sons who die in combat; it is their relatives who are murdered by the LTTE; they are the people who have lost their land and property; they are the people who have become refugees. Thus they have to be shown - by people who know - that there is a distinct difference between the agenda of the LTTE and the aspirations of Tamil people.

Nature of the Space for Peace Among Sinhalese

As most of us are quite aware, there has been for some time a tendency among many Sinhalese to make no conceptual difference between LTTE activists and ordinary Tamils. They are all lumped together as *koti*, or tigers. This situation is the result of a decade old war during which regular contact between the Tamil and Sinhala societies remained marginal and suspect. During that time, most public debates on nationalism, ethnicity and religion tended to be rather parochial and polemical leading to the institutionalization of overtly chauvinist attitudes on both sides. However, at the moment there is a small political space within which an attempt for a genuine peace may be initiated. On the part of the People's Alliance government, there is much the needed political will to build on this foundation. How long that political will last, however, remains to be seen.

The desire for peace among the Sinhalese has not come overnight, and it is certainly not the political achievement of any political party. On the one hand, part of that space has been carved out by a small group of Sinhala intellectuals over a long period of time; for their efforts, they have been castigated as traitors and demonized by sections of Sinhala society motivated by rather parochially defined nationalist currents. On the other hand, and more importantly, the real and sometimes tragic experiences of ordinary people have also contributed immensely to the emergence of this space. They were tired of losing their loved ones and relatives in the war. They were also wary of seeing no end to the military process that was rapidly losing its momentum as a glorious nationalist project. The experience of suffering at the hands of the JVP and the state in the late 1980s have also made many Sinhalese more sympathetic and sensitive to the problems and the suffering of Tamils - certainly more so than in the early 1980s.

But none of these relatively positive developments moulded by experiences of pain and bloodshed should be taken for granted or placed out of context. One must remember that there is also ample space to make avoidable mistakes and

destroy the slim avenues for peace that remain open. The emergence of a small but viable political space for peace is not the same thing as the eradication of institutionalized racism. Achieving the latter goal even to a reasonable extent may take much more time, perhaps another generation with careful planning. Decades of ethnic politics and misunderstanding are unlikely to vanish after two elections. It would be a mistake to assume so and quite naive to characterize President Kumaratunge's recent massive electoral victory as a rejection of racism per se. Many more complex variables motivated people to vote the way they did; to reduce such complexities to a single variable is sociologically unviable. All we have at the moment is simply a small political space within which peace may be legitimized. But such a space is also a fragile space that can be lost if we are not cautious. Let me give one recent example of a situation in which that small space was nearly destroyed.

Consider the new government's rather naive and amateurish handling of the public relations exercise consequent to the assassination of Gamini Dissanayake and fifty or so others. While there was no physical evidence to link the bombing that killed Dissanayake and others to the LTTE, the *modus operandi* of the killing and lessons from the past pointed towards the LTTE as the most likely culprit. Immediately after the explosion, sections of Sinhala society argued who the killers were, and came up with a list of possible culprits: the LTTE, Sirisena Cooray, Ranil Wickramasinghe, the new government in association with the LTTE. The government's propaganda apparatus - most clearly Rupavahini - kept on repeating an alleged LTTE denial of the bombing long before the LTTE itself officially made such a statement. In any case, since when do people take seriously the word of the LTTE for what it is? As we know, the LTTE has only acknowledged responsibility for attacks on military and some government infrastructural targets. They have never taken the responsibility for attacks on civilian targets. In this particular instance, the government looked as if it had suddenly become an apologist for the LTTE. It sounded and seemed a far more enthusiastic propagandist for the LTTE than Anton Balasingham himself.

Interestingly however, among the Tamils in Colombo (i.e. shop keepers, office workers etc., and not the pundit types) whom I spoke to, there was no confusion as to who was responsible for the assassination of Dissanayake. Most were convinced that the LTTE was the culprit. Similarly, as Hoole points out in his article, there was no confusion in Jaffna either. Not only did the people in Jaffna know that the LTTE was responsible, they also knew why. Moreover, they were also very angry since many perceived that the self-declared protectors of the Tamil people had destroyed (at least in the short run) the best chance for peace which had come their way in more than a decade.

Accepting as most likely LTTE complicity in the assassination would not have discredited the government. Nor should it have derailed the peace process; there is no reason, except in naive political discourse, why these two processes should be linked. After all, the destructive actions of the LTTE should not dictate political initiatives from the South. Moreover,

government frankness (which did not come through) and the continuation of negotiations with the LTTE would have made the government even more popular among the people in the North and East. Equally important, such a matter of fact approach would have prevented most of the negative criticisms that were levelled at the government. The government could also have explained to the people in the South without much trouble that events of this nature are likely to happen when one has to deal with a fascist group like the LTTE. The ground reality is that much of the Northern Province and parts of the Eastern province are under the direct or indirect military and administrative control of the LTTE. As such, irrespective of its actions, it would be necessary to negotiate with the LTTE - at least in the short run.

I would suggest that the reason why this fiasco did not backfire on the government at the presidential election had more to do with the complexity of voter expectation and behaviour rather than a sudden rejection of institutionalized racism. But the government came very close to destroying this fragile space for peace with its mishandling of this incident.

Expectations of Peace and LTTE's Political Agenda

Peace does not come merely as a result of euphoria or the expectations of the Sinhala and Tamil people, or the initiatives of the government. As we have already noted, the LTTE also plays a key role. However, considering the history of the LTTE would help initiate and sustain the kind of peace most people want. It does not appear to me that peace is part of the LTTE's immediate political agenda. Within the frame of reference of the current LTTE leadership's thinking, a relatively free democratic system of provincial government is not the ideal set up. The reason is that if such a system is allowed to operate, the LTTE may actually lose the political and military power which it currently enjoys. That power has primarily been consolidated by subverting democratic practices and stifling dissent within Tamil society itself. After all, the great majority of inmates in the LTTE's clandestine prisons are Tamils themselves. In other words, Prabhakaran would not like to lose the "supremo" status he currently enjoys. What this translates into is that while the current LTTE leadership is still intact, the prospects for any lasting peace are not particularly good irrespective of the wishes of Tamil and Sinhala people or of the government.

The LTTE will only change with internal criticism and dissent within Tamil society itself. Such criticism can only come if Tamil people in general believe that the LTTE is an obstacle to peace. As Mao Tse Tung once remarked, "guerrillas are fish swimming in a pond of public sympathy". In fact, they are fish swimming in a pond of collective fear as well. But ponds of public sympathy and collective fear can be drained. It would appear that it was precisely due to the LTTE's fear of such an outcome in the context of the PA government's peace initiatives and popular support for those initiatives in Tamil society that the LTTE decided to sabotage the peace process through the Dissanayake assassination. According to some sections of

Tamil opinion, with the assassination of Dissanayake, the LTTE managed to remove a potential threat to its existence as well as force the government itself to postpone the peace talks. However, if the politics of the LTTE is the only serious obstacle to peace, that obstacle needs to be overcome.

Such an endeavour is primarily an intellectual project, and not a military one. This is where Tamil intellectuals have a significant role to play. Moreover, the peace talks initiated by the government should go on irrespective of short-term failures resulting from LTTE tactics. That would be one way to establish the state's willingness to achieve peace, and also establish the LTTE's unwillingness to achieve the same goal.

Role of Tamil Intellectuals

The government has already demonstrated that it is incapable of tackling certain explosive situations. One reason for this perhaps is its relative lack of experience in governing. However, I have no doubt about the sincerity of at least some of its leaders in attempting to find a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict, or more likely to the military conflict that it has engendered. So, there is no harm in being hopeful and extending whatever help possible to them. Having said that, I would also suggest that it would be utterly dangerous to restrict the politics of peace to a group of politicians with varying degrees of experience and their dubious advisers and to the murderers and apologists of the LTTE.

In addition to the talks between these two groups which necessarily should take place, intellectuals and other interested persons from the North and the South should also initiate various processes specifically for long term exchange of information and ideas that would help the peace process. For instance, contacts have to be made with academics, teachers, non-LTTE politicians and ordinary citizens in the North-East without LTTE interference and censorship. We need to be informed about what is going on in areas to which most of us do not have direct access. Such long-term processes have to continue irrespective of the success or failure of the politics of the state and the LTTE. Therefore, I would urge my colleagues in the North and East and the South to make an initiative in this regard.

It is as part of such a long-term project that there is a need for public interventions to explain- among other things - the obvious differences between the agenda of the LTTE and the aspirations and problems of ordinary people in Jaffna and elsewhere. Precisely due to lack of such interventions, many Sinhalese perceive Tamil political opinion and activity as synonymous with the thinking and actions of the LTTE. However, for such interventions to have any real legitimacy, I believe they should ideally come from members of the Tamil community. They may be teachers, academics, professionals, and farmers. They may be living in Jaffna, Colombo or abroad as members of the diaspora. In short, these interventions have to come from people who have experienced what they are talking about and studied what they are talking about.

However, critical evaluations about serious problems and divisions in one's own society may not be easy. But it has to be done. To a reasonable extent this has occurred in Sinhala society. I would suggest that the critical evaluation of the Sinhala past and identity undertaken by some Sinhala social scientists in the late 1970s was the initial phase of this continuing process. If some of the literature of the Tamil diaspora is any indication, such a process has also occurred in Tamil society to a limited extent - i.e. Tamil societies in Boston, Melbourne, and London, but certainly not in Jaffna or elsewhere in Sri Lanka.

There are clear reasons why this is so. Silence in Jaffna is a legacy of LTTE terror and politics. Its critics have either disappeared or languish in unknown prisons. Many others in the North claim that they "open their mouths only to eat and clean their teeth". The LTTE is not exactly the ideal protector of free expression or of the democratic rights of the people it claims to rule over. It is more likely a protector of its own "democratic" rights. But in the North, silence is not indicative of a defeated people. The silence is also a weapon of the weak. People still continue to think and talk even though those thoughts and words may not manifest themselves in writing for a considerable time. The collective muttering of a multitude of people who were frustrated after the postponement of the second round of peace talks between the government and the LTTE.

Among some Tamils in the South, this silence and the lack of any evaluation of the politics of the LTTE is a legacy of misguided patriotism or misplaced priorities. On the other hand, it may be due to fear of the violent politics of the LTTE. For many, public interventions could also mean getting used to a shadowy underground existence. Leaving the LTTE-controlled areas would not guarantee their safety. For Tamil politicians linked to the current peace process it could also mean being placed on an LTTE hit list and having to be surrounded by armed body-guards on a routine basis. Clearly, the Sinhala intellectuals who initiated the critical evaluation of the Sinhala past, identity and politics have never had to face such a violent political force as the LTTE.

One argument that has been put forward to explain this relative silence is somewhat as follows: sustained and concerted public interventions by Tamil intellectuals critiquing the LTTE - among other things - can only begin after the peace process has gathered some momentum, and after a semblance of peace has been restored to the war-torn Northern and Eastern Provinces. I would suggest exactly the opposite. Peace can only be restored consequent to the deconstruction of the most polemical strands of Tamil myth-making and nationalist politics as well as by critiquing the violent politics of the LTTE. The dangers involved in such an endeavour are obvious. However, one can't simply await the arrival of peace without constructing the most important foundation for peace.

Whatever the restrictions to the free flow of information may be, that situation cannot continue if the overall peace process is to win any real legitimacy in the South. Without such legitimacy the long-term establishment of peace may not be

possible. That is why the reality of the experiences of Tamil people has to be documented and presented to the people in the South. We should perhaps note that the SSA's recent publication of the Sinhala version of the *Broken Palmyra* and the Mirje publication in English and Sinhala of a condensation of the UTHR reports have become popular reading material among many sections of Sinhala society, particularly undergraduates, students, monks and even military personnel.

But their understanding of the conflict and the reality of the North and East have to be regularly upgraded. The following are some of the questions that can be posed to which answers in the form of interventions may be provided: What is the nature of the LTTE's cult leadership? Why is the LTTE fascinated with glorified violence? How does its administration run? What is the nature of its politics in general? How does it treat its critics? What is the nature of its concept of justice? What are the opinions of different sections of the Tamil society about the LTTE? What are the avenues for peace ordinary Tamils suggest? If peace returns to the North and East, would the people like to be ruled by an LTTE dominated provincial regime? Do the bulk of the people closely identify themselves with the LTTE? Has the LTTE's continuing violent activities despite the government's peace initiatives initiated a process of delegitimizing them in the eyes of the Tamil people and is there adequate space for such a delegitimization? How do people in the North- East view politics in the South? How do people define and deal with state-sponsored military excesses? How do average Tamils view Sinhala? The list of such questions would be endless. It has to be endless because such questions have not been regularly posed and answered.

There are already some Sinhala newspapers that publish such interventions when available. The question now is not so much a problem with space in the print media, but a lack of interventions. A colleague suggested recently that it would be unfair and unreasonable to expect such interventions from Jaffna given the LTTE's iron rule and the fear psychosis it has inculcated. However, history has amply demonstrated that underground literature has been smuggled out of much more problematic areas and that such literature has made a difference in many situations of apparent hopelessness. The reality is that we need such informed knowledge in situations such as these. It is up to Tamil intellectuals to gather this information from all possible sources.

What we have to keep in mind is that in the end any failure in the peace process cannot be merely labeled as the work of Sinhala chauvinists, Tamil chauvinists, or the LTTE. Such a failure would also be the result of the silence of Tamil intellectuals. ■

Bibliography

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Dr. Sasanka Perera teaches in the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo.

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