COMMUNAL CONFLICT IN MODERN SRI LANKA: SEARCH FOR A RESOLUTION

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The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the nature of the internal conflict in modern Sri Lanka as well as to suggest means to overcome such a conflict. The paper begins with a discussion of the rationale of the modern Sri Lankan state, followed by a critical examination of three areas of modern nation building there, i.e., "politics," "economics" and "security." The concluding section then puts forward alternative solutions towards peaceful resolution of the internal strife in the island.

The Rationality of the Modern Sri Lankan State

"Modern Sri Lanka," as a political agenda, is not very old. Its origin lies in the intellectual thinking of 19th century Ceylon,[1] mimicking largely the ideas presented by the nationalist gurus of the then colonial India.[2] While the influence of the nationalist movement across the Palk Strait cannot be denied, Sri Lanka's march towards independence had its own colour and composition. One distinguishing feature in Sri Lanka's nationalist struggle, which apparently sets it apart from India's case, has been its ability to overcome colonial domination rather peacefully. In the context of post-colonial experience, however, the difference is an illusive one. If in India communal conflict between the Hindus and Muslims began with the hegemonic construction of "nationalist consciousness" (the idea of which has been freely borrowed from the intellectual tradition of post-16th century Europe [Ahmed, 1994a]), in Sri Lanka the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils began more concretely with the organization of "colonialism proper" (a synonym for intellectual intrusion) by the British (Nandy, 1983).

Colonialism proper, however, did not begin in Sri Lanka immediately upon the arrival of the British. It was only in the 1830s-1850s (indeed, half a century after the British landed) that schools were constructed "to educate students on the British model" (Wijesinha, 1986: 8; Obeyesekere, 1982), thereby first creating the conditions for the organization and reproduction of intellectual dependency of the Sri Lankans on the West. The impact of such intrusion was profound and all-pervasive.

Take the case of "race," for example, whose equivalent word is difficult to find in the Sri Lankan languages, whether Sinhala or Tamil (Gunawardana, 1990: 45), yet during the colonial era, largely due to the intellectual predominance of racial theories in Europe at that time,[3] "differences" within the Sri Lankan population were readily identified in racial terms (Nissan and Stirrat, 1990). To make matters worse, as early as 1833 the colonial power chose to organize political representation in Sri Lanka on a racial basis, which, indeed, made the colonial

administration nominate one '"inhala," one "Burgher," one "Tamil," and later on, one "Kandyan" and one "Moor," to *represent* their respective communities at the national level (Nissan and Stirrat, 1990: 28). Soon after this development, the communalization of Sri Lankan society became a living thing; needless to say, conducive to the organization and reproduction of colonial power in the island.

There is, however, something more pertinent yet disturbing in the organization of society on a racial basis, and that is, it invites *alienation* within and amongst people, both with respect to those who have been included in the community and those who have been left out. The end result of this alienation is mistrust and mutual suspicion if not communal hatred. It is not surprising that the word "race," derived from the Middle French *race* and Italian *razza*, originally meant "the act of breeding" within one's family, thereby *separating* or *alienating* one family or generation from another (*Webster's Dictionary*, 1981: 1870). But this is something which is equally true for categories like "ethnic," "linguistic" or "religious" when used to give sense to the "differences" existing between the people in the society, particularly if that society happens to be multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious, that is, *pluralist*, like Sri Lanka. Let me explain this further.

The word "ethnic" is derived from the Greek *ethnikos*, which originally meant "heathen, pagan, gentile; non-Jewish, non-Christian nations" (Webster's Dictionary, 1981:781). It does not take much imagination to see the "otherness" in the concept, close to being, as Urmila Phadnis pointed out, "pejorative, particulartistic and parochial" (Phadnis, 1985: 6). Any unity based on the so-called ethnic composition, or labelling people *ethnically*, therefore, creates structures of divisions and disunity within diverse groups of people in the society. Sri Lankan society is a living example of this.

With the concept of "religion," the divisiveness is somewhat different. This has to do mainly with the understanding of "religion" in the South Asian context. Whereas the South Asian or Sanskrit word for religion is *dharma*, from the root *dhr*, meaning to hold up, support, carry, sustain, or maintain, almost like that of a mother, the (Western) word "religion," derived from the Latin *re-ligio*, meant "to link back, or bind" (Campbell, 1976: 13, 23-24; Iftekharuzzaman and Ahmed, 1992). Indeed, religion in South Asia today is understood more in the sense of the Western notion than *dharma*, bringing with it the appeal for the otherwise ill-fated religio-communal unity than mutual tolerance. Sri Lanka's unholy and tragic experience with religion is a case in point.

The divisive nature in the organization of linguistic unity need hardly be stressed, except for the fact that language, if politicized, could reproduce racism as well. Ali Mazrui, while highlighting European racism based on skin colour, refers to a variety of alternative forms of racism in history, including one based on language (Mazrui, 1986). Indeed, once language is used to organize unity for political purpose, as in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in South Asia, and that again, in the light of the experience of the West, it ceases to be a secular category, instead becomes a powerful tool in the organization and reproduction of linguistic racism favourable to the power of the dominant linguistic community vis-à-vis other linguistic communities of the country.

Indeed, it is in the backdrop of the racial division of the Sri Lankan people, followed later on by the construction of ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions, that *nationalism* in Sri Lanka came to play its part -- not just in "freeing" the island from the British but also in organizing Sri Lanka's "political," "economic" and "security" activities in the post-colonial era. In the process, and more importantly, under a democratic set up, Sri Lankan nationalism itself became communalized, with the (majority) Sinhalese *leading* the (minority) Tamils in all the activities of the state simply because the former enjoyed a numerical advantage over the latter.

There is something that begs immediate elaboration here. The communalization of nationalism that I have referred to, contrary to the views expressed more generally, is hardly something that is peculiar to Sri Lanka. While the complexity and the connected communal violence could give the appearance of it being special to the Sri Lankan situation, a cursory look at the genealogy of the concept of *nation*, which incidentally is at the center of all that is happening, will surely lend support to my contention.

In medieval times, for instance, the concept of nation was in vogue within the corridors of European universities, referring, interestingly, to a group of students from a particular region or country who assembled together for mutual protection and cooperation in a strange land (Ahmed, 1995). By mid-16th century the "citizens" of the country concerned, partly for being put into a commonality dialectically through the organization of non-citizen-based *national grouping* in the country and partly to highlight their separate status from the "aliens," also began to refer themselves as "nation," leading soon to the transformation of the concept into a positive thing that is to be desired and championed. In both these instances, an odd sense of *alienation*, marking the concept of *nation*, remains clear.

Indeed, so powerful has been its history, particularly with respect to its contribution to European history, that today it has caught the imagination of millions of people, who find themselves *alienated* either for reasons of birth, religion, language, ethnicity, culture, geography, complexion, occupation, or simply for being "different." In this context, the construction of "modern Sri Lanka" is, on the one hand, the termination point of the natives' alienation from the British, while, on the other hand, the beginning of alienation (and correspondingly, divisions) among the Sri Lankan people. Needless to say, the alienation of the Sri Lankan Tamils remains intrinsically related to the organization and reproduction of the modern Sri Lankan nationhood.

There is, however, a marked difference between the pre-and post-independence organization of "Sinhala community" or "Tamil community," and this not only in the sense of such communities having to deal with a different kind of power, one occasioned by the replacement of the British, but rather for having the communities witness their respective elites organize and reproduce such power by way of appealing to communal solidarity. Such a situation not only puts tremendous pressure on the less powerful community to organize its **separate** identity but also deepens the hatred between the well-defined communities, particularly when nation-building is organized and measured in terms of the will of the majority. It is this I will now discuss in some detail.

I will limit my exposition here to three general, inter-related, areas of modern nation-building in Sri Lanka: "politics," "economics" and "security." Each depicts a series of tactics and

strategy suited to the task of organizing and reproducing the highly-communalized modern state of Sri Lanka.

The Communalization of the Modern State:
The Will of the Majority and the Reproduction of Hegemony

The post-independence Sri Lankan state, in the backdrop of an almost unblemished record in organizing and enforcing the democratic principle of majority rule, has mainly been a top-down exercise structured to reproduce the power of the ruling class while fulfilling the demands and aspirations of the majority people of the country. The latter has both secular and religious dimensions. While, at one end, one could see the state busying itself in secular works that are as diverse as education, communication, industrialization, housing, etc., all with an eye to reach as many people as possible, on the other end, the state actively participates in religious issues, supporting, for example, the Buddhist faith at the state level, catered and limited to the members of the majority Buddhist-Sinhala community. This may look somewhat odd for "democratic Sri Lanka," the question to which I will return shortly, but what is more important is the fact that at both ends the majority community becomes the ultimate pacesetter of events, which decidedly puts minority communities, including the Hindu-Tamils, in a situation unfavorable to them. Let me explain this further.

Take the case of electoral politics, for example, where the principle of majority is *primus inter pares* to all things related to it, including the very functioning of modern democracy. In reality, what it means is that, if a candidate wants to win the election he or she must attract the votes of the majority. Now, in a situation, where the constituency is already fragmented socially, that is, along communal (ethnic, religious as well as linguistic) lines, it is quite natural that the political parties would put up candidates who can muster the maximum number of votes. One way to ensure that (and also the easiest) would be to heat up communal feelings.

This is precisely what has happened in Sri Lanka. The introduction of universal suffrage in 1931 could be a good starting point to reflect on the matter, as K. M. de Silva noted:

> . . . in the contests to the State Council, the national legislature, in 1931, candidates in most constituencies resorted to the conventional appeals to caste and religious loyalties, apart from other parochial considerations which a largely illiterate and unorganized electorate . . . *could most readily understand and respond to.* With the introduction of universal suffrage, the Buddhists came into their own. The great majority of the Sinhalese candidates were Buddhists *or claimed to be Buddhists because it was now advantageous to do so* (emphasis mine) (1993: 4).

It was a short journey from here when, following independence, the Senanayakes and the Bandaranaikes, albeit in different degrees, resorted to policies of attracting the majority of the electors, who were incidentally Buddhist-Sinhalese, so as to win and run the government. In this

quest for *governorship*, nationalism, now garbed in Buddhist-Sinhala idiom, became a powerful tool.

In fact, it had become the business of the "popularly-elected government" to organize the terms of reference of nationality and nation-building. So dominant was its role that by mid-1950s nation-building in Sri Lanka began to be considered solely in terms of the definition provided by such a government. Indeed, in 1956, under SWRD Bandaranaike, not only was Sinhala made the sole official language of Sri Lanka but measures were also taken to support the Buddhist faith and Sinhala culture at the state level. Although the question of language has changed since then, albeit under "violent" pressure from the Tamil community, which had forced the country to accept Tamil as one of the two official languages, the constitutional provisions for the special status for Buddhism is still there.

What is unique, however, in all these developments is that suddenly all Sri Lankans were *made* conscious that they are no longer just "people" but either "Buddhist-Sinhalese" or "Tamil-Hindus" or "Muslim-Tamils," etc., and the fact of being one or the other determined their fate and prospect in the island. In this context, Elizabeth Nissan and R. L. Stirrat pointed out:

> [Even during the colonial era] the developing Tamil and Sinhala identities were not in direct competition; they were primarily directed against, and mediated by, the British. It was only later, after Independence, that the British were to be replaced by the Tamil as the "dangerous other" implied in much of the self-conscious proclamations of Sinhala identity and community (1990: 32).

Nationalist consciousness thus began to be constructed in a way, which, while favouring the "Buddhist-Sinhala majority," put a burden on the latter to "govern" and "lead" the rest of the society, almost in a fashion resembling the psychology and the purpose of Kipling's "The White Man's Burden"!

The alienation of the non-Buddhist-Sinhalese, particularly that of the "Hindu-Tamil minority," was, therefore, rooted in the nationalist discourse that unfolded in the island. The success of the Buddhist-Sinhala identity only undermined the interests of the Hindu-Tamils, indeed, to the extent that between 1956 and 1970 there was a drop from 30 to 5 per cent in the proportion of Tamils in the Ceylon Administrative Service, from 50 to 5 in the clerical service, 60 to 10 in the professions (engineers, doctors, lecturers), 40 to 1 in the armed forces and 40 to 5 in the labour forces.[4] It does not take much imagination from here to contemplate *how* the Hindu-Tamils would react. Indeed, the "Tamil Tigers" were largely the product of this nation-building process, one which remained well-disposed towards the "Buddhist-Sinhala majority." Under such orchestrated circumstances, the organization and reproduction of communal conflict becomes difficult to contain.

Things have become even more difficult in the light of the fact that the presence of alien powers since the 15th century (first Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British) and the organization of colonialism proper under the British have restricted the autonomous and healthy development of *civil society* in Sri Lanka. In fact, the latter is often found parroting government's version of things, one which is well documented in the now confirmed

reconstruction of history by the intelligentsia of both Buddhist-Sinhala and Hindu-Tamil communities (Spencer, 1990; de Silva, 1988; Wagner, 1992: 92-112). In this context, whatever role civil society now has in the making of the Sri Lankan nation remains not only passive in relation to the role of the government but also fragmented on communal lines. Such a situation, apart from breeding animosity and mutual hatred between rival communities, tends to limit the role of civil society in the task of (communal) conflict resolution.

The Developmentality of the State: Governmental Economy, Populism and Dissent

But lest one understands the activities taking place in the political domain as something bordering on a series of conspiracies under the leadership of the dominant Buddhist-Sinhalese forces, it is important to refer to Sri Lanka's state of economy. For better understanding of the issue, a distinction ought to be made between what the word "economy" meant in the West and what it had come to mean in Sri Lanka. In the West the word "economy" originally meant the art of managing a household or "the government of the family," which only in the sixteenth century had been elevated to the state level, suggesting that "the meticulous attention of the father towards his family be introduced into the management of the state."[5] The sense of voluntarism in managing or governing things is still there in the West, one which is well expressed by the term "economic government" (Foucault 1991: 92-93).

In Sri Lanka, the case was quite different. By the time of independence, government intervention in the area of "economics" had already reached a stage where it could be best summed up, in contrast to the "economic government" of the West, as *governmental economy*, referring to the all-pervasive role of the government in organizing and reproducing the area of "economics," indeed, to the point of constructing a model of development for the state. For such model of development to sustain, however, certain specific tactics were required, which, at times, included elements as diverse as intellectual intrusion and populism. One such case, for example, is related to the development of the public school system in Sri Lanka, which, although a product of good intention and, as far as raising the percentage of mass literacy is concerned, a success story to be proud of, remained critical in organizing and reproducing the model of development suited to the hegemonic forces of post-colonial Sri Lanka. A closer exposition will make this clear.

While the noble effort of establishing government schools began during the colonial rule, its massive expansion took place after independence. According to one figure, in 1950 there were 3,188 (or 51%) and 3,058 (or 49%) government and private schools respectively, but by 1980 that figure drastically changed to 9,072 (or 99%) and 46 (or 1%) government and private schools respectively (de Silva, 1993: 198). If anything, it clearly showed the sheer power of the government in schooling the population, one which contributed to the growth and nurturing of a precise *developmentality of the state*, i.e., a mentality where 'development' is primarily geared towards the needs and aspirations of the "majority" of the people.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind here that in Sri Lanka the role of government in education was never restricted to financing the schools only, it went much beyond that. G. H. Peiris gives a good account of this:

> The increase of government control over general education is exemplified by certain crucial developments in the system of public examinations. . . . The examinations are based on standard syllabuses formulated by the Ministry of Education; and, the preparation of students for them has come to be based increasingly on course-guides and text books, also prepared by the Ministry. A further extension of this process witnessed in the past few years is that the Ministry of Education (through its Regional Directorate) has taken over the function of setting the question papers for annual school examinations at post-primary grades. Thus it is seen that *a government control extends even to the content of knowledge* imparted by the schools (emphasis mine) (1993: 197-98).

Indeed, in view of the role of the "popularly-elected government" in education nationally, such governmentalization of knowledge not only limits competition and creativity, which otherwise could be found in autonomous and independent schooling, but also caters to Buddhist-Sinhala populism bent on organizing the developmentality of the state that I have referred to earlier. While the former undermines, as some critics have already pointed out, "the quality of education" (Peiris, 1993: 199-200), the latter invites dissent from amongst the non-Buddhist-Sinhala minority. If the second issue creates conditions for civil conflicts, particularly those between "Buddhist-Sinhala majority" and "Hindu-Tamil minority," the first issue, I believe, remains an obstacle to the nurturing of innovative ideas towards resolving such conflicts. But that is not all.

A quick glance at Sri Lanka's economic history will show that the developmentality of the state found its best and boldest expression in the island's adoption of "socialism." K. M. de Silva in his observation gives an indication of that:

> Since plantation enterprise, nascent industry and the island's trade were dominated by foreign capitalists, and the minorities were seen to be disproportionately influential within the indigenous capitalist class, Buddhist pressure groups *viewed 'socialism' as a means of redressing the balance in favour of the majority group.* Every extension of state control over trade and industry . . . could be, and was, justified on the ground that *it helped curtail the influence of foreigners and the minorities.* (emphasis mine) (1993: 18).

Indeed, in each and every sphere of the economy where state control was introduced to spread "socialism" and "develop" the country, whether in the area of employment generation or manufacturing industry or transportation or trade, etc., it practically ended up strengthening and reproducing the geopolitical space and the power base of the Buddhist-Sinhala majority. Development in Sri Lanka, therefore, has come to stand not as a national feature encompassing

the entire society, but something that is limited to the task of fulfilling the goals and aspirations of the "majority" community.

One must not take this situation to be limited to the Bandaranaikes' period of "socialist" governorship [1956-1967; 1970-1977], rather it covers, albeit with certain modifications in the means, the entire range of developmental activities of post-independence period. Even Jayewardene's, Premadasa's and now Wijetunga's so-called shift towards a "free market economy" did not imply a reversal of the developmentality the three had inherited, rather it only reflected the power and the maturity of the majority community to sustain and reproduce itself without the direct sponsorship of the state. Critics were also quick to point out the negative impact of the free market economy on the more well-to-do Tamils of the north, as Newton Gunasinghe rightly observed:

> The open economic policy which removed the ban on essential agricultural products, flooding the market with cheap chillies, onions, and potatoes *ruined the Jaffna middle peasantry*, one of the most productive sections of the Lankan agricultural population (emphasis added) (1989: 254).

Such ruination of a communal magnitude was interpreted in the north as another proof of the insensitivity of the post-independence (communalized) state of Sri Lanka towards the needs and aspirations of the minorities.

Indeed, the developmentality of the state had so conditioned the model of development in the island that it now remains meaningful only in relation to a populist paradigm (expressed sometimes in the language of "socialism," at times "open economy," sometimes "poverty alleviation," and so on) suited to reproduce the hegemony favourable to the "Buddhist-Sinhala majority." In such a situation, it is a far cry to redress the civil conflicts in the island through "development."

The Business of Security:
The Militarization of the Society and the Decivilisation of Conflict Resolution

There is an intrinsic relationship between the development of the modern state and the development of the modern security forces, including the military. This is true not only with respect to the organization and development of the security forces as an institution but also, and more importantly, with regard to the question of organizing and defining the *security problematique* of the country. The two, however, are correlated. In fact, there developed a model of security essentially geared towards the task of organizing and reproducing an hegemony favourable to the dominant social forces. Such a model of security not only alienated the "minorities" but also militarized the society with critical consequences to the task of conflict resolution in the island. I will try to explain this in some detail.

The military as a proper institution came into being in Sri Lanka after independence in 1949, when the Sri Lankan army was established to protect the country's new-found sovereignty

and statehood. This does not mean that Sri Lanka under the British did not have a military with natives serving in it, rather it had a small one, consisting mainly of volunteers. When a full-time standing army was established most of these volunteers were-re-commissioned, which proved somewhat out of tune with the state of affairs then prevailing in the country as the bulk of the members belonging to the officer corps -- three-fifths of them -- were recruited from the minority communities (Tamils, Burghers and Christians) (de Silva, 1993: 351). While such a situation of over-representation of the minorities arose out of Britain's earlier policy of divide and rule in the island, to which the new-born country fell victim, the fact remains that the first commanders of the Sri Lankan military were seconded British officers as part of the defense agreement signed between Sri Lanka and Britain on the eve of Sri Lanka's independence. It was, therefore, not unnatural that a measure of continuity was emphasized in the defense establishment. It is now quite clear, however, that this was only a makeshift arrangement, which the popularly-elected government sought to "correct" on the first opportunity.

It did not take long to correct this. In fact, in less than a decade, government intervention helped to swing the balance in favour of the Buddhist-Sinhalese; indeed, to the extent that by late 1950s the latter began to be "over-represente" (de Silva, 1993: 352). This is best reflected in the number of Sri Lankan cadets sent to Sandhurst. Between 1957 and 1959, 72% of the Sri Lankan cadets were Sinhalese, while in 1960 every single Sri Lankan cadet sent to Sandhurst turned out to be a Sinhalese (de Silva, 1993: 353). It was becoming evident that the post-independence recomposition of the military only reflected the extent to which governmentality had conditioned the organization and development of the military. In fact, not only was the military increasingly becoming "manne" by the majority community but, more interestingly, the majority community itself was becoming the "purpose" for the organization and development of the military. As a result, *national security* had become a thing of the majority, nurtured, organized and defined by the government.

It has been pointed out rightly that the Sri Lankan army is "an internal security force" (de Silva, 1993: 354). In fact, modern Sri Lanka has never fought a foreign power. On the contrary, it sought outside help to contain civil unrest inside the country. Indeed, in 1971 during the JVP insurgency and again in 1987 following the Indo-Lankan Agreement (Halliday, 1975: 151-220), when hegemony favourable to the dominant social forces was critically threatened, the incumbent government sought military help from outside powers, mainly India. Although the final outcome in each of these two cases greatly differed, the success of the military in putting down the JVP insurgency in 1971 practically led to the decivilisation of conflict resolution in the island. And it is this factor, more than anything else now, that stands as the immediate obstacle to the task of finding *fresh and innovative means* towards resolving civil conflict in northern Sri Lanka. The reasons are not difficult to understand.

The success of the military against the JVP in 1971 created a "model" of conflict resolution in the sense that, *violent military measures* are now regarded as "useful," "efficient" and "practical" in resolving political conflicts or civil unrest in the country. While the presence of a military (whose primary task is to deter external aggression) provided an institutional as well as a legal basis for the use of force at home, the success in routing out the JVP menace created grounds for its massive use against the Tamil militants. Few here, however, realized that the

success story of the military vis-à-vis the JVP (both of which incidentally are within the domain of the "majority community") could not just be replicated in the north. In fact, up until now the government-led military operations in the north only helped the militants, particularly the Tamil Tigers, to consolidate their position among the "minority" Tamil population (Ahmed, 1994b).

There is, however, a far more critical dimension to the recurrent use of the military in Sri Lanka. The more the military becomes essential to the task of conflict resolution the more the art of government becomes paralysed, leading to further militarization of the society. It is, therefore, no surprise that in the midst of an increased use of the military, the government is time and again failing to nurture a lasting solution to the civil conflict in the island. If civil unrest is to be contained in Sri Lanka, the much abused notion of "national security" needs to be replaced by a more sober and practical notion of *societal security*. This would, of course, require a total restructuring of the current mode of thinking on security.

Conclusion: Towards an Alternative Discourse

To successfully restructure thinking on security, it is necessary to advocate an alternative discourse that is wholly practical and relevant to the people of Sri Lanka. In this connection, let me begin by saying what is *not* an alternative. To isolate the communal conflict and think of resolving it independent of the hegemonic organization and development of "modern Sri Lanka" is not something that can be referred to as an alternative. There are three versions to this approach:

The first one is the so-called "mainstream" position, which seeks to resolve the communal conflict "within existing political framework." What it really means is that communal conflict in modern Sri Lanka is an internal problem of the state and is no business of others. It calls for a dialogue between the government and the Tamil militants not so much for changing the state of things as for creating an environment, which will reduce international pressure, mainly Indian, for meeting some of the demands of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Judged merely from the violent conflicts in the north and, at times, in the streets of Colombo, not to mention the recent gruesome murder of Premadasa, this is an "utopian" rather than a "realist" proposal.

The second version, which I will call liberal, calls for substantial devolution of power towards "regional autonomy." One scholar, supportive of this version, had the following thing to say in its favour:

> The only way out [from the current conflict] is a substantial devolution of power amounting to regional autonomy, which runs against the 1978 Constitution, designed to concentrate power in the presidential executive. A dialogue with the militants is needed as well as as amnesty to those willing to accept a political solution. The entire political structure will have to be overhauled to democratize the system on an enduring basis within the context of a united Sri Lanka (Gunasinghe, 1989: 252).[6]

While there are certain positive elements in this version, it critically misses the already-entrenched "modernist" hopes and aspirations of the Sri Lankan Tamils, namely their desire to emerge in the world as a non-dependent, sovereign "nation." Moreover, communalized "regional autonomy," by the very fact of its composition, would tend to organize and reproduce communalism in the island. This version otherwise shows little understanding not only of the modernist development of Sri Lanka but also of the conflicts arising from it.

The third version I will call ultra-liberal, not just for advocating the construction of yet another "independent"-nation-state in South Asia but for clinging simultaneously to the very *idea* of "nation" itself. That is, I do not discount the possibility of "independent *Eelam.*" In fact, given the violent nature of the movement, it could probably turn out to be the only option left to redress the physical and mental pain there. However, it will not resolve the contradictions that has given rise to the Tamil alienation in the first place. While the struggle of the Sri Lankan Tamils may be justified on the account of being dominated by an hegemony closely linked to the majority Buddhist-Sinhala community, the struggle for a separate nation-state, quite ironically, makes the Tamils choose the very path against which they are all struggling, namely nationalism and modern nation-building. Moreover, not only does this version fail to consider the fate of the Sri Lankan Tamils outside the *Eelam* area (in which case the creation of *Eelam* would put these Tamils further into a pathetic position vis-à-vis the majority community) it also fails to resolve the contradictions internal to the organization and reproduction of modern Sri Lanka. Here lies the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the Sri Lankan Tamil activists. Indeed, now, nothing short of innovation could save the people of the island!

This brings us to the question of alternative thinking, or rather, a search for it. The premise from which it ought to start is a simple one. It must take into account not this or that community but *all the people* into consideration. In this context, it must aspire towards a solution which will not only resolve the problems of the Sri Lankan Tamils as well as that of the other minorities but also those of the Buddhist-Sinhala masses who are equally suffering from the alienation brought about by modernity and the power of hegemony. Put differently, it is possible to reach for a solution only when the Buddhist-Sinhalese learn to see the problems of the Hindu-Tamils not from the perspective of Buddhist-Sinhalese but from the perspective of the Hindu-Tamils. Simultaneously, the Hindu-Tamils must learn to see the problems of the Buddhist-Sinhala masses not from the perspective of the Hindu-Tamils but from Buddhist-Sinhalese's perspective. Since the Hindu-Tamils are now under Buddhist-Sinhala hegemony, the onus of untangling the knot lies with the Buddhist-Sinhalese first.

But how will the Buddhist-Sinhalese undertake this task? With whom will they work? Where will they start? One must seriously ponder on all these questions. In Sri Lanka (in fact, in the whole of South Asia), there is a tendency to think that all kinds of work outside one's home is the responsibility of the government. This includes things from collecting garbage to protecting the national flag. In everything the citizens expect the presence of the government. In fact, they all have been conditioned by a precise "governmentality" (Foucault, 1991), organized from the time of British colonial domination. Needless to say, the *dominant social forces* have benefitted immensely from this. It provides them with a ready-made tool to organize and reproduce hegemony. Even with regard to communal conflict, the members of the majority

community are looking towards the government for a solution. Indeed, if anything is now the greatest impediment in resolving the communal problem in Sri Lanka, it is this *mentality* of the majority community. Only by overcoming this mentality and the different structures arising from it can the Buddhist-Sinhalese think of resolving the communal problem in the island. Let me explain this further.

In any state, problems of socio-political and economic significance can be resolved at two different levels, which incidentally opens up space for varied and different ways to resolve a particular problem. The first level is *political society* of the state, which includes government, military, rules and regulations, etc., while the second level is *civil society*, which includes political parties, different socio-cultural organizations, education, the media (newspapers, television, radio), etc. (Ahmed, 1993).[7] These levels, of course, are a methodological distinction and we do not see them as separate entities in reality. It is important to note here that since independence "political society" alone has delegated to itself the task of seeking a resolution of the communal issue in Sri Lanka. Consequently, the task became limited in the activities between the government and the Hindu-Tamils, or more precisely, the Tamil militants. But the "government" is not the whole state nor does it include civil society, whereas the "problem" definitely involves the whole state, including civil society. In this context, if Sri Lanka's communal conflict is to be resolved, the key prerequisite is total participation of both political and civil societies. Such participation could be divided into three levels:

Level I: The Democratisation of the State

The first task in this level is to *stop* all activities of the military, including its hegemonic role in the predominantly Tamil area. It is a common knowledge that continuation of civil war (be it of any scale) yields no positive returns to any country. A lion share of Sri Lanka's national budget, for instance, is diverted for the military operations in the north. One highly placed Sri Lankan government source told me that in order to confront the Tamil Tigers the military is now consuming approximately 40 per cent of government's spending. There is no question that such expenditure impedes development activities of the state. Moreover, Sri Lanka cannot claim to be a democracy if a part of its country remains under the threat of the military. It increasingly leads to a situation where the military gains a strong foothold in the decision-making process of the state. This may be termed as the "decivilization" of the decision-making process, a development, no doubt, contrary to the spirit of democracy.

Level II: The Democratisation of Society and Culture

This is a work completely outside the sphere of government. There are various ways in which the society can participate in this level. The objective here is to bring about change in one's way of thinking. An example will suffice to make my point clear. The three areas of modern nation-building that I have touched -- "politics," "economics" and "security" -- are also three areas that are glorified and sacredly tutored in the schools and Universities of Sri Lanka. This is done not simply by the members of the majority community who enjoy an advantage over

the minorities in the field of employment in the educational sector but rather, and more critically, by the things that are taught for the purpose of education, that is, the ones making up the *curriculum*.

There are two critical features in the over-all organization of the curriculum, from primary to higher levels of education. One is its bias towards the *history* of the majority community that is best reflected in the glorification of the "nation," "nationalism" and "nationhood," while the other feature, which is equally dominant, is its free-borrowing from the knowledge-house of the West. If the former contributes to the reproduction of hegemony favourable to the Buddhist-Sinhala majority, the latter organizes a Sri Lankan mind towards building the state in the image of the modern "Western" state. Understandably, both the features invite communal conflicts, which are often difficult to contain.

In this respect, there is little that the governmentalized schools and Universities can do. Indeed, in certain cases it has reached a pathetic level where, for example, a newly recruited faculty member of the University, even with an Oxon Ph.D., is required to sit for the language proficiency test in advanced Sinhalese for her to be confirmed in the job. Moreover, the system of centralized examination hardly makes sense when one student is tutored in the capital city of Colombo with all the "reading" and "thinking" facilities (libraries, seminars, media, etc.), while the other in a rural area having to write her examination depending on text books and 'low quality' teaching. The way out, of course, is to *decentralize* the examination system with radical transformation in the curriculum, that is, making the latter relevant and practical to the *place* of schooling. At the same time, without having to go via the Ministry seated in Colombo, a school in a remote village in northern or southern Sri Lanka, for example, ought to have all the freedom to exchange ideas and materials with schools in Barisal (Bangladesh) or elsewhere in the world. Indeed, if the current state of affairs is to be transformed, it must be challenged with activities based on minimum *trust* that each and every person in Sri Lanka is capable of judging what is best for her/his immediate homestead and upbringing. It is otherwise not very difficult to see here that what the alternative discourse intends to achieve is the empowerment of civil society.

Level III: The Decentralization of the State and Society

The task at this level is to *decentralize* power in the fullest sense of the term. Colonialism has colonised not only Sri Lanka's institutions but also the minds of its members. Today the citizens tend to draw a line between "public" and "private" responsibilities, a consequence of this has been the uncritical acceptance of concentration or centralisation of power in the hands of political society as something "natural." This has led to the pitiful condition that the state is now in. To change this situation, decentralization of power has to be implemented at all levels. Indeed, it calls for radically transforming the modern Sri Lankan state structure, to be substituted by a bottom-up approach, that is, empowering the *localities* with power fizzling out at the top.

To concretize the statement further, freedom from "modern Sri Lánka" should not be restricted to the Tamil area alone, instead it should be provided to all the provinces of Sri Lanka. The provinces in their turn should provide freedom to all the districts, the districts to the villages

and cities, and if the latter becomes vastly populated, to the municipalities and so on. That is, except for territorial security, localities will have the power to decide upon all things. This will obviously require radical and an innovative rewriting of the Sri Lankan Constitution. But to arrive at this stage will first require immense innovations in fields as diverse as education, economics, electoral system, military, administration of things and so on, indeed, in all those things which have until now gone to reproduce alienation and divisions among people in modern Sri Lanka. If communal conflict in modern Sri Lanka is to be resolved, it is this attempt to go beyond modernity which needs to be nurtured, intellectually as well as politically.

Notes

1. Renamed Sri Lanka since 1972.

2. In 1919 the Ceylon National Congress was formed in line with the formation of the Indian National Congress three decades before (Ponnambalam, 1983). See also Mahatma Gandhi's speech to Ceylon National Congress, Colombo, on 1 December 1927 titled "Self-Rule and Self-Government," in Iyer, 1987, pp. 245-52.

3. Indeed, by the end of 1830s European racial theory assumed biological characteristics with Charles Darwin and his biological theory of evolution (Nissan and Stirrat, 1990: 28).

4. This was calculated by a trade union of Tamil Government servants, the *Arasanga Eluthu Vinaya Sangam* (Schwarz, 1988: 10).

5. For a closer exposition of the transformation of the word "economy," see Foucault (1991: 92).

6. For a similar position, see Kellas, 1991, pp. 118-23.

7. "Civil society," however, is understood here not in the Western sense of the term with its strong emphasis on *urbanity* (Ford, 1975: 19-20), but rather in the sense put forward by Rabindranath Tagore highlighting the dichotomy between *rashtra* (state) and *puroshamaj* (civil society) (Roy, 1988).

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