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Ravindra Ranasinha / October 1, 2009

Multi-Culturalism or Mono-Culture: A Quest in Sri Lanka

Veteran dramatist **Ravindra Ranasinha** looks at the plurality of the Sri Lankan society and shares the view that the war in the island would end up with crushing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), thus expecting the rise of a dominant mono-culture of the Sinhala community. Soon after the completion of this essay on May 19, 2009, Sri Lankan government declared the end of the civil war with the killing of the LTTE Supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran.



The entrance of University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka is decorated with posters and hoardings praising the heroic deeds of the Sri Lankan Army in their fight against the LTTE. A nation-wide campaign was initiated by the Sri Lankan Government to boost the morale of the army. (Photo: Sethu Das)

IN common Sri Lanka is found to be a multi ethnic society with several religions and languages functioning as cultural determinants. However, this multi-ethnic structure is further decimated to

a caste structure which is very much ingrained in the Lankan society. Even with all the modern technological advancements still Sri Lanka is struggling with the constrictions that the society faces due to caste issues. This plurality is a result of the early economic structure in the country where the people were assigned different jobs to fulfill towards the king and the caste system was automatically established with such diverse occupations.

When going into detail we find that those who did fishing, agriculture, pottery, laundering, drumming etc., have been given names according to the profession so that they were continuously identified by that name and as a separate community which we now call the caste. However, the society at large imagined and placed values to each profession, so that one community became superior to another. Hence, the people in the govigama caste (agriculturalists) is considered as superior to all other castes since they were the ones who engaged themselves in the paddy fields and provided the quota of rice to the palace as ordered by the king. The economic function of the society thus became the power structure of the country before the British administrative system was imposed on us. Since the king was the focal point in the power authority, clashes among the different castes were not to be found as the interaction between people in different castes were limited and they were responsible only for the king.

This caste system was seen not only in the South but also in the North where the majority of the Tamils live. It is considered that the caste system among the Tamils is too rigid than what could be seen among the Sinhala people. It is told that the Liberation Tigers have to a vast extent abolished the caste system in the Northern region in order to bring about equality among all Tamil people. Doubts have been cast again as to whether that effort of the LTTE would be fruitful if the Sinhala government establishes its authority in the North and once again call for the traditional social discourse of the Tamils.

In the East we can see even the Muslims have their divisions according to the professions. This was evident during the Provincial Council elections in the East when most fisher-folk voted Pillayan, one-time an LTTE carder and made him the chief-minister.

The Southern part of the country is much more Westernised but in the rural sector we still can see vitality given to the caste system as that still prevails as hegemonic despite the modern administrative structure. When the modern British model of administration amounts just to be a political structure, the older system of castes is not only political but also socio-cultural in its core. The hierarchical pattern of the castes inevitably created the value systems wanted by the society thus determining their traditions, behavioral patterns and thoughts. The Sinhala society accepted whatever hierarchical order formed by the caste system unquestionably since it was for the king that everyone worked and not for any other. Now, the caste system has gradually lost its socio-economic and political importance and functions in a vague manner since people are still not in a position to give up their imagined communities.

In the present context, we do not find the political economy creating such socio-cultural values instead it has gone further and created a class society which now seems to be very complicated with the neo-imperialist policies. The classes in the modern sense are now no more to be seen as the neo-colonial system has made everyone in the country to be a wage earner. The proletariat has been converted to a middle class and the workers struggles have got entrapped in middle class values such as better salaries, promotions and facilities which has become its culture. The amazing factor to be seen in Sri Lanka is that with the disguise of a People's Movement the non-governmental organisations have come forward in organising the trade unions whereas, in the past the workers unions had their own Marxist agendas. The neo-imperialist agenda is so subtle that it has erased off the Marxist fighting spirit of the workers and passed over all the workers activities to the non-governmental organisations thus creating a further politic of NGO's. The plurality of our society has thus become very complex.

Presently, one could see that people from different castes and classes mix with each other and the socio-hierarchical pattern has taken a different shade. It has happened with the war situation in the country which has brought all Sinhala people together irrespective of their position or status in the society to hail their soldiers as heroes. The heroic cult has made the members of the security forces and the police to be treated as the 'very important people' in the society. They are being given free transport, medicine, and their children are given first preference to admit to national schools and so all other people have become secondary to them. This has inspired many youngsters to go to the battlefield, however, one should note that these members of the armed forces and the police are unable to create an 'imagined community' since they are only conscious of the monthly wage they receive and their involvement in the war does not give them any value as political beings. In contrast, the LTTE fighters progress as an 'imagined community' and they are completely a political lot. Therefore, even if the Sinhala forces completely destroys the LTTE the war can continue with the 'imagined' world of the Tamils thus putting the Sinhala politician into a helpless situation for another hundred or more years. This on the other hand reveals that the Sinhala politician is engaged in this civil strife not as a political affair but as a socio-cultural phenomenon which brings him all prestige to raise his social level further as a warrior.

The present war for Mahinda Rajapakse is a means to gain recognition to his family which is in fact a war against the Bandaranaiques who have a feudal background. Rajapakse who is from a lower caste in the South is now in the process of raising himself to be the hero in the history so that he will be hailed as a warrior. In this sense, the war waged against the LTTE has no political

value. The war is a Sinhala Buddhist war in a sheer cultural sense and Rajapakse's effort is to show himself as a pure Sinhala Buddhist leader who came to rule the country from the lower level of the society after the much popularised king Dutugemunu who is said to have destroyed the army of the Chola king Elara.

This picture we receive now narrows down the plurality of our Sri Lankan society thus showing us that presently only the Sinhala and the Tamils do exist due to the war and other communities have lost their values and are not visible. Many are of the view that this war will end with the crushing of the LTTE thus expecting once again rising of a dominant mono-culture of the Sinhala community. Can the plurality wither in a society so easily?

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