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Ravindra Ranasinha / June 24, 2010

Politicising Citizen Thinking in Sri Lanka

Ravindra Ranasinha examines how the thinking patterns of a country functions in the political maneuvering of citizen's thinking. This investigation could be considered as an introduction to a deep study on the prevailing 'silence' in Sri Lanka. This new thinking will open doors for anyone who wishes to explore cultural politics of the world. As Ravindra has shown, change of human thinking is a continuous process but a transformation of it to become a positive phenomenon should contain the thoughts of love and compassion — a task for every individual.



The life in Sri Lanka is completely politicised that no single person is left who could utter a single word against the rulers. Such utterance has become a threat to the life of the utterer and therefore silence has taken the reins to its hands. This lull is visible and looks quite queer in a world where there is so much talk about democracy and human rights. The so called democracy prevalent in Sri Lanka is a democracy to keep the people silent. A repressive democracy that the citizens in this country has never experienced. A democracy that has left no room for the citizens to air their views openly. It is a democracy which has trampled critical thinking and has brought citizens to the line of ruler's ideology. This is a moment that we need to talk about the ideology of the whole nation.

Ideology is not an abstract phenomenon. The concreteness of it is to be investigated in every aspect of social life. The recent political warfare against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has shown that Sinhala as a race, Buddhism as a religion, South as a geography and Mahawamsa as history, played massive roles in moulding the minds of the people. The mindset of the Sinhala community as everyone spoke those days was a formation of all these elements and none of those can be removed from the discussion of ideology. It is in the same manner the LTTE moulded the minds of the Tamils and their fighters. This happens all over the world and all clashes become political because of the disparity between ideologies.

This political clash pervades into everyday life of a citizen and creates meanings that they have never heard of. Meanings and interpretations thus became the business of the media and the intelligentsia inclusive of the civil society. New terms entered into the language and new ways of interpreting words became a game of the civil society. The clash transformed into a language game. If one investigates into the terms used by different newspapers during the war time clearly shows that the changing of minds was a task taken through language play. Binaries were developed and Blacks and Whites were formed. Thus, the villains and moralists existed. Good people and bad people were visible. Traitors and patriots were distinguished. Militarists and terrorists were identified. It is with these binary polars that the Sri Lankans lived and still lives. A kind of benumbness was brought in with this complexity of thinking. Mind blocks were created in a vast scale and the citizen found comfort zones in such blocks merely to secure his or her life. The blocks were diverse but with a mere aim: the aim of crushing the 'Other'. This sentiment of crushing has its roots in enmity, hatred, abhorrence, and denial. We could use ample synonyms for these terms and all that leads to create a 'vicious image of the *Other*'.



Tamil S. Sarangan, 11 years old, with his parrot Peti, which he brought with him as he escaped his home at the Tamil Tiger-held area following fighting between Sri Lankan army and Tamil Tigers, seen on February 23, 2009. He now stays in a temporary refugee camp in Vavuniya, northern Sri Lanka. (Photo Courtesy: REUTERS/Nir Elias)

In the history we find instances where such blocks were created in the minds of the citizens. One such example is the socialist revolution that was witnessed in Russia and China. Russia went to the extremes of differentiating the 'friend' and the 'enemy'. It was visible in the Chinese Revolution too. Those revolutions were named as class revolutions and the proletariat was formed against the wealthy and the middle class. It was a massive thrust to crush a class different to the proletariat. Finally, the proletariat himself became a victim of its own class ideology. The worker was compelled to obey and be loyal to the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, in reality it was not the dictatorship of the proletariat that existed but the ruler's dictatorship that reigned. Therefore, the visible ideology was the ideology of the ruler. Stalin and Mao affected a transformation in their societies by crushing the thinking. Those programs were called cultural revolutions. Then let us logically define ideology as a cultural product. This discussion is then about the cultural politics that makes the States to transform their citizens into subjects. 'I say: *the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects.* In the interaction of this double constitution exists the functioning of all ideology, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning'.¹

Even today we could see Chavez imposing his thinking on his subjects. Fidel has his thinking and the machine to spread and control the minds of his Cuban subjects. America created the binary of 'terrorist' and 'patriot' after September 11 attack and that polarisation affected even the National Liberation Struggles all over the world. This even led to the crush of the Tamil struggle within its own geography. Not only that the American action permitted and upheld the notion that everyone who goes against the thinking of the State is a 'terrorist' and so automatically every citizen is now an *implied terrorist* in his or her own geography. No one knows at what point one becomes a patriot and an enemy. The subtleness of such an issue arose in Sri Lanka when Mahinda Rajapakse took General Fonseka to task.

Fonseka was the Army General and Rajapakse was the political leader. It was this binary that finally came to a point of clash: or rather the question 'who is the real hero?' Is it Rajapakse or Fonseka? It was a test for the people and the people were happy that they could be heroes by electing one among them. Thus the election process became a tool to create the ideology of the country. During the war time it was the media that took the main role in setting the minds for a win. Now it is the election that takes the batten to set the mind to decide on the hero.

The hero was decided by the citizens and there were several indicators for the people to elect Rajapakse the politician: (1) '*he won the war*' (2) '*he crushed the LTTE*' (3) '*he loves the country*' (4) '*he is a strong Buddhist*' (5) '*he saved everyone*' and so on and so forth.

Apart from this the role played by the international community also helps to mould the thinking of the people. The international community was harping on Democracy and Human Rights but the Sri Lankan government paid no heed for such virulent criticism. The defiance the government showed against Western countries became one of the major factors in moulding the mind of the Sinhala community. There was a hidden psychic complexity behind this issue which is yet to be examined. The hatred the Sinhala

people had against the British for turning Sri Lanka into a colony was the major psychic element that made the whole nation to defy the Western bloc during the war time. There were posters that were exhibited to say the numbers of murders the British committed when they ruled the island and they were questioned of their right to interfere into the affairs in this island and they, too, were branded for their crimes. Such pattern of thinking crept deep into the minds of the people as it was a very sensitive issue, especially, for those who consider themselves as *patriots*.

The sentiment of freedom that existed sixty years back was once again brought to be applied to the current issue. Citizens got into a mess at this point as they were unable to identify the difference between the two struggles: the struggle against the Colonial power and the struggle of the Tamils for autonomy. Both were national struggles but one was against a foreign force, whereas the other is an internal conflict for self-determination. The citizen lost his place to identify his stand on these two struggles and was compelled to accept just the sentiment of freedom which was mostly promoted by the media. The lost citizen left his thinking to be carried away by the media drama. The daily news reports of the war, especially, the television coverage made the citizen to be happy and feel free. His only assurance was that 'I will not die' or 'my family members will not die' due to a bomb blast. A fear to lose one's life has given this thinking and such thinking is politicised through the election of the Executive.

It is clear that the personal thoughts of the citizen have metamorphosed and have become political unquestionably. The lull that we experience in the country is a result of this politicisation of thinking. The fear psychosis that emanated among the citizens at one point in the history of Lanka reached its climax with the election of the *desired* politicians who saved their lives by crushing the LTTE. Can we equate this silence with freedom or with happiness? Or will this freedom and happiness means once again fear to lose life. The fear to be outspoken is the fear to lose one's life and therefore, the lull reins the everyday life. Silence has become the ideology of the day. To deepen the silence, Defense Secretary's 'Hard Talk' with BBC has contributed further. He said that Fonseka would be hanged if he betrays the country. Now this betrayal is revealing of war crimes. Tissanayagam was imprisoned for betraying the State and that was also for revealing military atrocities. This revealing of truths becomes a betrayal for the State and the interpretation is given politically. Truth is thus suppressed and nobody wants to become a betrayer. All have turned into patriots! A silent patriotic lot!

Where will this silence take the whole nation to?

We started our investigation into the prevailing ideology of the country and now left with a silence that would once again transform to explode the existing thinking. This cycle of change in human thought is once again an explosion of freedom and the fear to be silent. Russian Perestroika and Chinese Capitalist reforms are nothing but fear of maintaining the traditional policies of their predecessors. The Berlin wall was brought down by the people, but the State was silent with a fear of interrupting the progressive steps that were sought for freedom. One day the Chinese will have to maintain silence when the Tibetans proclaim their freedom. At the moment the Tibetans have a fear that the Chinese repression will continue but the truth is that such repression will not be eternal and one day the Chinese military action will have to be stopped in order to have the Tibetans enjoy their freedom. The Chinese will get fed up one day. Even the Sinhala government will get fed up in trying to find solutions for the ethnic issue and automatically they will decide on devolving power to the Tamil region. Therefore, changing of the minds of the rulers will create a change in the thinking of the masses. This process will go on as long as fear and freedom hold each others hands.

Religion as an ideology explains why fear becomes part of human life. *"As human beings we all want to be happy and free from misery. We have learned that the key to happiness is inner peace. The greatest obstacles to inner peace are disturbing emotions such as anger and attachment, fear and suspicion, while love and compassion, a sense of universal responsibility are the sources of peace and happiness"*, says the Dalai Lama. It is clear from this statement that even the freedom we seek is an attachment that will not bring us any inner peace. Religious leaders have thus deconstructed the notion of freedom and shown us that our mundane struggles entail fear and suspicion. This psychology is what continues as long as repression goes on for greediness: greed for land, wealth and power. Love and compassion have not entered into the territories of the repressive minds. Even love and compassion has been interpreted by them to suit their needs and not for the needs of the oppressed. A transformation in thinking or the governing ideologies is possible only if love and compassion is taken as universal responsibilities so that social justice is established for the well-being of everyone. Still we have not witnessed in our country an ideology for a caring society. We await such a change. A change where truth is voiced and love reigns as the only ideology making the negative emotion of fear and silence to disappear. When would this happen? When the people stop poking into others affairs and that is what Buddha said: *'Pay no attention to the faults of others, things done or left undone by others. Consider only what by oneself is done or left undone'*. It is this individual responsibility that everyone has neglected and being carried away by petty needs like heroism and patriotism. One could become a hero if one could brighten the life of the other. This ideology is completely ignored as the present struggle is for power. Power and repression have brought fear and silence and it is time for us to reconsider our thinking and see the possibility of enriching ourselves with love and compassion.

1. Althusser, Louis (1970), Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays — 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (Notes towards an Investigation).

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