

# THE MYTH OF CENTRALISED POLITY OF SRI LANKA

Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne

At a recent seminar at the BIMCH, H. L. de Silva, Sri Lanka's leading constitutional lawyer, opined that a "federal solution to end the ethnic conflict is like a snake a drowning man clutches onto in desperation to stay afloat." For polemical measure he added "federalism is the beguiling serpent which by its fatal sting will bring an end to this precious Republic." However the Sri Lankan Republic is in existential tatters, riven asunder by one of the most belligerent forms of ethno-religious nationalism that South Asia has witnessed. I'm not referring to the LTTE, but to the dominant form of nationalism in Sri Lanka's last 100 years, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, the dominant narrative that has set the terms of debate about the nature of the postcolonial Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) state.

In spite of the existence of a highly efficient (although authoritarian) *de facto* Tamil state in parts of the Northeast, the jury remains out on whether Eelam will ever be an adequate replacement for the current moribund Sri Lankan cum Sinhala state. My argument is that Sri Lanka's past offers resources which should be used to challenge the arguments frequently invoked by the likes of H.L de Silva and others who misrecognise federalism as a term of abuse. The Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran recently impressed on the Rajapakse regime, the necessity for a federal blue print which the Government should put before the LTTE and the wider Tamil social formation. This is a timely moment in which to defend a federal solution to Sri Lanka's national question.

Only at brief moments in her pre-European past has Sri Lanka ever exhibited centralizing dynamics. The degree of centralisation was intimately connected to the administration of a classical hydraulic civilisation. In the Anuradhapura period the maintenance of the irrigation system was delegated to various farming communities who had a financial interest in their maintenance. Even during the South Indian incursions both farming communities and monasteries usually maintained the irrigation system. Ironically the centralisation of administration under both Vijayabahu and Parakramabahu may have led to a loss of local autonomy. As C.R de Silva has noted the chaos in the *rajarata* in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century may have sparked a migration of those skilled in irrigation management. This, combined with the decline of a more centralized administrative system, would have had an adverse

effect on the ability to maintain the lifeblood of the agricultural economy. In effect the brief experiment with centralisation led to the denuding of local expertise.

Between the late 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries Sinhala society began to reorganize itself in the East West and the South of the island. The resurgence of Sinhala power was centered on first Kotte and then Sitavaka. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century the rulers of Kotte succeeded in limiting the power of the Jaffna Kingdom to the peninsula in the North, but the authority of Kotte was limited to the West and Southwest of the island. In this it was also limited by the power of regional chiefs. The consequence of this was a decentralized form of rule which itself was emblematic of the decline of central power registered by the slow collapse of Polonnaruwa. Centralisation was thus not the norm in Ceylon's pre-colonial past.

Modern Ceylon owes its modernity to the institutional and governmental reforms introduced by the British from 1833. The reforms recommended by the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission of 1829 resulted on the one hand in the generation of a centralized Ceylonese State, which served the interests of European and local mercantile capital. It cannot be legitimated by recourse to the Pali Chronicles. British rule was also marked by the introduction of new modalities of power, which were to have a significant impact on the way in which the precolonial was imagined in the lexicon of Sinhala nationalism. A new taxonomy of identity emerged and it was one which racialised the discourse of identity in Ceylon. Its destructive legacy is still with us.

The Sinhala political class that emerged from the gradual break-up of the *Ceylon National Congress* was one that saw in the centralised state a means of controlling the demands of the Sinhala and Tamil periphery. Increasingly nationalist elements in the Sinhala political class began to construe campaigns for devolution cum federalism by first G.G Ponnambalam and then S.J.V Chelvanayagam as tantamount to a demand for separation. We now have a *de facto* separate state in parts of the Northeast, which by many outside accounts is more efficient than the *de jure* state. This ground reality is a telling indictment of the systematic

mismanagement of administrative and constitutional relations between the Sinhala and Tamil (and Burgher) social formations by successive Sri Lanka Governments since 1956. A *de facto* state of the mind will still pertain even if Colombo is successful in recapturing Elephant Pass over the next three-four weeks. Indeed the collective disillusionment of the Tamil social formation within Sri Lanka and the wider diaspora will be intensified if the Government adopts a scorched earth policy in its likely campaign against Elephant Pass. We need hardly speculate on what the LTTE response will be in these circumstances were the armed forces to inflict a form of collective punishment against Tamil civilians if it moves against the LTTE in the North.

Let me suggest that while the precolonial gives rise to what we can characterise as a form of Buddhist cosmic sovereignty, in practice, administration on the whole was highly decentralised. The model of kingship that had taken root in Anuradhapura was Ashokan. It was one that stressed the symbiotic nature of Buddhist kingship, for the king, in encompassing the dhamma (the cosmic law), projects outwards onto the social his beneficent nature. Righteous Buddhist kingship leads to the acquisition of *karma*. The accumulation merit had the effect of showering blessings on the laity for the righteous king is one that determines the moral status of his subjects. Buddhist kingship in the Anuradhapura period becomes increasingly embedded within a Buddhist cosmological frame. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century kings were venerated as a *bodhisattvas* or Buddhas to be and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, at the end of the Anuradhapura period, kings imagined themselves as *kinsmen of the Buddha*. The consequence was that kingship refracted the aura of the Buddha himself. It gives symbolic weight to the concept of *dhammadipa* that the island belonged to the Buddha, although 'dhammadipa' is only cited once in the *Mahavamsa*. By extension the Sinhalese polity was the possession of the *sasana* (Buddhist teaching) and the Sinhalese were the heirs to the island.

In spite of these literary tropes the precolonial Buddhist-Hindu polities were fairly devolved enterprises, exhibiting only brief moments of centralized control, as already indicated. The Sinhalese Buddhist-Hindu polities that dominated the pre-British period refracted at a number of levels the non-bounded nature of the Buddhist cosmos. Stanley Tambiah, in his account of the vicissitudes of Thai Buddhist kingship, has argued that early Buddhism forged a model of the polity that conjoined religion in the form of the Sangha with a political order, which elevated kingship as its

central principle. The result was a form of cosmic sovereignty in which Buddhist kingship took the form of an overlord who delegated authority to tributary rulers and governors. While such relationships reflected the hierarchical aspect of the cosmos, with tributary polities paying tribute to the center, in substance, cosmic sovereignty generated highly decentralized forms of administrative ordering.

There is enough archaeological and textual evidence to indicate that both Sri Lanka's and mainland South East Asia's precolonial states were essentially as Stanley Tambiah asserts, decentralised *galactic polities*. Through the overarching principles of Buddhist kingship these *galactic polities* established a link between the domain of the gods and the domain of material existence. In their spatial and administrative functioning, these polities, which established a binary relationship between Buddhist kingship and the cosmic order, were non-centralised entities. As Tambiah reminds us (and it's a sentiment repeated in H.L. Seneviratne's seminal analysis of the Kandyan Kingdom) they were pulsating entities that exhibited the tensions of contesting levels of patrons and clients. These polities were anything but bureaucratic hierarchies. There is indirect evidence from the Pali Vinaya, which suggests that the vast Ashokan Empire far from been a centralized monarchy was more likely to have been a galactic entity with lesser political replicas circulating the central domain.

Their organizational form possibly has Buddhist scriptural justification. In the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* (*The Lions Roar of the Wheel Conquering King*) the Buddha extols that a *cakkavatti* king on conquering new territory should tell his vassals to "continue to govern as you did before" (cited by Collins. 1996: 429). In both Burmese and Indian thought there was no idea of how to extinguish a conquered territory. The Buddha in the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* was voicing what appears to be a conceptual problem in Hindu-Buddhist political thought at the time. The decentralised administrative cum bureaucratic order of the galactic polity possibly has Canonical import by virtue of the devolutionary imperative that the Buddha attributes to Buddhist kingship in the shadow of conquest. In the shadow of conquest the Buddha recaptures the ethical import of *karma* by virtue of his blue print for devolved government, if not by design, then by accident. Stanley Tambiah notes in his 1976 study of the Thai Buddhist polity that the logic of the *cakkavatti* king gave way to "the decentralized locational disposition of the traditional polity and its replication of like entities on a decreasing scale – which constitute a galactic constellation rather than a

bureaucratic hierarchy..." (114). In his 1978 study of the Kandyan Kingdom, H.L. Seneviratne observed that the evidence indicated that the authority of the king "waned as the provinces stretched farther away from the capital." (174).

As Michael Roberts has recently shown, the Chronicle tradition, along with a wider corpus of Pali and Sinhala literature, indicates the consolidation of a Sinhalese consciousness in the medieval period (10<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> century) and the middle period (16<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> century) of Sri Lanka's recorded history. This was a consciousness that indeed reveals distinctive processes of 'othering' authorized by Sinhala and Pali textual practices. In practice however – and following the logic of encompassment rather than exclusion – the Sinhalese Buddhist-Hindu polities revealed a capacity to incorporate the outsider/other who came from South India, albeit in a prescribed hierarchical relation. Notwithstanding this hierarchical process of transformation, in practice, these precolonial polities gave rise to highly decentred administrative practices that implicitly drew on the non-bounded nature of the cosmic order.

These Buddhist arguments in favour of a decentralised cum-federal Sri Lankan polity depend on a radical transformation

in Sinhalese (Buddhist) public space. A reinvigorated public space needs to both deconstruct and then reconstruct the tropes of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. It is the profoundly un-Buddhist nature of Sinhalese nationalism that the discursive community in Sri Lanka has to unpack before the task of critical reconstruction of the Sri Lankan past can begin. But the intellectual resources for defending a highly devolved state structure through indigenous Buddhist-Hindu resources are there. There can be no guarantee that a devolved cum-federal state structure will keep Sri Lanka united as the break-up of Yugoslavia reveals. However the disintegration of Yugoslavia was premised on the capture of the state by a Serbian hegemonic project. In Sri Lanka the unitary state has lost all public credibility with the minorities because the Sinhalese political class chose to systematically entrench its numerical majority in the institutions of state. The Sinhala political leadership should look to Sri Lanka's precolonial past for evidence that the order of things was far from hegemonic.

Citations to Collins are to Steven Collins, "The Lions's Roar on the Wheel-Turning King: A response to Andrew Huxley's 'The Buddha and the Social Contract'" in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (1996) Vol. 24 (4), 421-436. ■

Dr. Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne, Lecturer in Law, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

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