THE WORLD CAN'T BE SO EASILY DIVIDED

Amartya Sen

When people talk about clashing civilizations, as so many politicians and academics do now, they can sometimes miss the central issue. Categorizing the people of the world by "civilization" is crude and inconsistent and ignores other ways of seeing people, linked to politics, language, literature, class, occupation or other affiliations.

To talk about "the Islamic world" or "the Western world" is to adopt an impoverished vision of humanity as unalterably divided. In fact, civilizations are hard to partition in this way, given the diversities within each society as well as the linkages among different countries and cultures. For example, describing India as a "Hindu civilization" misses the fact that India has more Muslims than any other country except Indonesia.

It is futile to try to understand Indian art, literature, music, food or politics without seeing the extensive interactions across barriers of religious communities. These include Hindus and Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians (who have been in India since at least the fourth century, well before England's conversion to Christianity), Jews (present since the fall of Jerusalem), and even atheists and agnostics.

Speaking of India as a Hindu civilization may be comforting to the Hindu fundamentalist, but it is an odd reading of India.

Similar coarseness can be seen in the other categories invoked, like "the Islamic World." Consider Akbar and Aurangzeb, two Muslim emperors of the Mogul dynasty in India. Aurangzeb tried hard to convert Hindus into Muslims and instituted various policies in that direction, of which taxing non-Muslims was only one example.

In contrast, Akbar revelled in his multiethnic court and pluralist laws, and issued official proclamations insisting that no one "should be interfered with on account of religion" and that "anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him."

If a homogeneous view of Islam were to be taken, then only one of these emperors could count as a true Muslim. The Islamic fundamentalist would have no time for Akbar, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, given his insistence that tolerance is a defining characteristic of Islam, would have to consider ex-communicating Aurangzeb. I expect both Akbar and Aurangzeb would protest, and so would I.

A similar crudity is present in the characterization of what is called "Western civilization." Tolerance and individual freedom have certainly been present in European history. But there is no dearth of diversity here, either.

When Akbar was making his pronouncements on religious tolerance in Agra, in 1590s, the Inquisitions were still going on; in 1600, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy, in Campo dei Fiori in Rome.

Dividing the world into discrete civilizations is not just crude. It propels us into the absurd belief that this partitioning is natural and necessary and must overwhelm all other ways of identifying people.

That imperious view goes not only against the sentiment that "we human beings are all much the same," but also against the more plausible understanding that we are diversely different. For example, Bangladesh's split from Pakistan was not connected with religion, but with language and politics.

Each of us has many features in our self-conception. Our religion, important as it may be, cannot be an all-engulfing identity. Even a shared poverty can be a source of solidarity across the borders.

The main hope of harmony lies not in any imagined uniformity, but in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions into impenetrable civilizational camps.

Political leaders who section off humanity into various "worlds" stand to make the world more flammable – even when their intentions are very different. They also end up, in the case of civilizations defined by religion, lending authority to religious leaders seen as spokesmen for their "worlds." In the process, other voices are muffled and other concerns silenced.

The robbing of our plural identities not only reduces us; it impoverishes the world. ■

Amartya Sen, master of Trinity College, Cambridge, won the Nobel Memorial Prize for economics in 1998.

LIBERALISATION AND POLITICAL DECAY: SRI LANKA'S JOURNEY FROM WELFARE STATE TO A BRUTALISED SOCIETY

David Dunham and Sisira Jayasuriya

Only two decades ago, there was consensus in the international development literature that Sri Lanka stood out a paragon of social development and pluralist democracy. Today, its economy is in trouble. It lurches from crisis to crisis; the war continues, there is widespread disillusionment with political leadership (of whatever party), and few can ever have lasting faith in the intentions of government. There is a general feeling that the rapid growth and prosperity that should have followed economic reform has been systematically undermined by a lethal combination of bad governance and effects of the ethnic conflict— in a sense, that the country got the economics right but fell short on the politics. Social and political developments are treated as exogenous variables in the reform equation, unrelated to the monumental changes that have taken place in economic policy.

It is our contention that this view is wrong, and that it is a serious misrepresentation of the Sri Lankan problem. We will argue that, regardless of what the World Bank and the IMF may have us believe, in practice, no liberalisation package is just economic. It invariably combines both economic and political elements. It is country-specific, embodying and shaped by institutions and political culture, and it is the politico-economic character of the particular package that determines the post-reform trajectory. We believe, therefore, that what has been happening in Sri Lanka has to be seen as the outcome of inter-linked economic and political policies, implemented in a distinct but dynamically-evolving historical-institutional setting. Liberalisation has to be interpreted, not just as a turning point in economic policy, but as part of a much broader picture, giving momentum to the profound and disturbing transformation that has occurred in the social and political life of the country.

At the same time, however, it is important to recognise that pre-reform Sri Lanka was never quite the haven of peace, democracy and equality that has been depicted. The roots of post-reform problems are to be found in what happened earlier—in pre-existing, historically-evolved socio-political and institutional structures. There have been clear continuities. It is essential, therefore, to look at the 1977 policy changes in a wider context in order to be able to appreciate how the past shaped the future. When the UNP came to power in 1977, the Sri Lankan economy had reached an impasse and fundamental changes in policy were clearly imperative. Economic stagnation was generating socio-political instability, democratic institutions were being undermined by authoritarian leanings of the government, and a proliferation of government regulations and extensive state intervention in all areas of economic life stimulated rent-seeking and corruption.

So many of these problems are not new. When it came, specific features of the liberalisation programme (and the manner of its implementation) reflected and interacted with pre-reform structures of socio-political relations and networks of patronage. In particular, they fed (and heightened) pre-existing ethnic and class tensions. The liberalisation process neither reduced nor eliminated rent extraction: on the contrary, it expanded the opportunities that existed on a quite unprecedented scale. Politicians, state bureaucrats and a new group, the military and police hierarchy, found a fertile ground for large-scale self-enrichment through the control of state power. However, since these opportunities were threatened by existing political freedoms, potential public scrutiny, and normal democratic processes, incentives to undermine legal and political freedoms and institutions grew. Once locked into this path, those in control of the state ensured that the economic reforms were designed and implemented in such a way that the benefits continued. A mutually reinforcing process of economic 'reforms' and socio-political decay was thus set in motion.

But Sri Lanka is not unique in this. It is noteworthy that, for all its distinctive features, there are remarkable similarities between Sri Lankan experience and that of many other countries that have implemented liberalisation policy reforms over the course of the last decade. The experience of economic crisis, social and ethnic conflict and political disintegration in many Central and Eastern European countries echoes a similar story, and the relevance to other South Asian countries is obvious. This provides analysis with an important sense of perspective.

The structure of the argument is the following. We begin by presenting our view that the point of entry is critical in understanding what is happening—that you have to consider the actual Sri Lankan policy package (that was both economic and political), not just an economic package (along the lines of neo-liberal orthodoxy). We then try to conceptualise likely links between the economics and politics based on recent theoretical developments and the experiences of other countries. After that, the discussion reverts back to Sri Lanka, re-appraising what happened and exploring in more detail the inter-linkages between liberalisation and socio-political decay. The discussion is then rounded off with some brief concluding remarks.[1]