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# RIGHT SPEECH AND FOLLIES AND FANTASIES IN THE SRI LANKAN CONFLICT

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*He reunites the people who are divided or strengthens the unity of those that are united. He is happy to see agreement and harmony among people and these are the qualities which he spreads among people through his words. He does not speak harsh language. He speaks words that are gentle, soothing to hear, loving, touching the heart, courteous, affectionate and agreeable to many.*

*This is the right speech.  
Anguttara Nikaya*

In an often quoted line Marx remarked, “History repeats itself first as tragedy, second as farce” and years later, Henry Ford, not known exactly either for his scholarship or his political wisdom, nevertheless said wisely “We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history that we make to-day”. In considering these two views about history and applying them to events in Sri Lanka, it is clear that we must amend Marx to: “History” is being written in Sri Lanka today by fools and fanatics and is leading to immense tragedy. Rather, in Sri Lanka to-day, it is Ford’s dictum that we must take seriously: the only worthwhile history is the history we make today.

The conflict in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese people and the Tamil people, it is claimed, began soon after the country gained its independence from Britain in 1948. In 1956, the conflict accelerated with the election of a Sinhala nationalist government headed by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and came to a head with the passage of what is commonly known as the “Sinhala Only Act”. From thenceforth, there were non-violent confrontations, violent confrontations, pogroms against the Tamils and eventually the violent confrontation spearheaded by the Tigers on behalf of the Tamils and the Sri Lankan State. This conflict has been ideologized both before and after the emergence of the violent confrontation by various myths and fantasies that are mutually contradictory and, needless to say, have only a remote connection to facts. Nevertheless, they have taken a decisive role in the continuation of the conflict, however unacceptable or absurd the claims are. I propose to give a summary of a few these fantasies and myths and confront them with the facts on the ground and examine not either their historical accuracy or their epistemological acumen – but rather their *relevance* to the construction of a modern Sri Lankan

nation state and suggest a few steps that can be taken to that end.

## The Myths in the Air

It is fruitless at this stage of the relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamils to wonder which side began one of the most persistent follies and fantasies that have bedeviled the political discourse. Nevertheless, it is best to begin with the Sinhala discourse on nationalism and rights since they are the majority with control of the major institutions of the society — journals, newspapers, universities, courts of law, legislatures radio and television, and, above all, a standing army, thereby having the institutional power with which to assert and defend their discourse. I will examine one such myth – using the word in the anthropological sense — recounted in the Mahavamsa, the claim of rights based on a primordial occupation of the island. This is based on the claim that a Prince from India named Vijaya descended from an unnatural union between a lion and princess, came to an island inhabited by savages and, by one means or another, took possession of the island and brought civilization to it. Further, it is claimed that the Buddha visited the island and blessed it as the home of his creed and entrusted its kings and its inhabitants with the responsibility to protect and safeguard the religion. The historical veracity of these claims apart, let us, for argument’s sake, grant all of these claims except the story of bestiality. Again, let us not challenge the claim that these events occurred 2500 years ago. Since then successive kingdoms have come and gone and many invaders too have come, tarried for a while and left too. The last invader left in 1948.

If the events are taken as indisputable, the question arises as to their relevance today. One of the main arguments of the Sinhala nationalist discourse is that since the *current* Sinhala people are descended from these early invaders they should have certain special rights that are not available to others who inhabit the island. This includes the enshrinement of Buddhism as the “state religion”, Sinhalese as the official language and a pre-eminence given to the Sinhala culture. Just or not as these claims may be, it is fallacious to *base* these claims on the basis of a primordial occupancy of the land and the right of inheritance. *This theory applies only to private property in the shape of land and goods and not to political rights.* In many defenses of the claims of

the Sinhalese, the rules applicable to private property are smuggled into the argument. The implication is that insofar as the present-day Sinhalese are descended from Vijaya and his merry men, they are exclusively *entitled* to the land. Another aspect of this claim is the acceptance of a theory of patrilineal descent: the original fathers who came with Vijay, according to the *Mahavamsa* married Pandyan princesses as well as commoners from the Pandyan country. In this line of argument, matrilineal descent must be discounted!

The Buddha's visit and his offer of the religion to the island, as recounted in the *Mahavamsa*, are treated as a "gifts" or "bequests" in the literal sense of these terms and, therefore, transmitted over the generations to those who are now called Buddhists. Here again, the religion is treated as a form of property that is passed from one generation to another and anyone who "owns" it can claim special rights over others and have not only special responsibility towards it, but can claim special rights based on such ownership. Of course religion cannot be "owned" and Sinhalese were not the only Buddhists. Buddhism had a serious presence in the Tamil country too and when the Saivite revival occurred many Buddhists reconverted to Saivism while others left the region and settled in the nearest Buddhist country – Sri Lanka, and probably in the Jaffna peninsula within the island.

The Tamils have their own version of this discourse of primordially. They do not have a hard text like the *Mahavamsa* on which to found their claims and had to resort to other conjectures. One is the appeal to mythology: Ravana from the *Ramayana* story is adduced as the original king of "Lanka": he was a Saivite and from the descriptions in the relevant texts, he was dark-complexioned and was, therefore, a Dravidian. The reliance on the *Mahavamsa* to base current political claims is bad enough, but to use the story of Rama and Ravana, in a sense, worse. The historical basis of the *Ramayana* has never been established and even taking it as myth, it is of doubtful value because there is no basis for the claim that the Sri Lanka of today is the "Lanka" in the story. The inherent implausibility of a King of Sri Lanka going to Ayodhya to kidnap an "Aryan" princess and an army of thousands coming all the way to Sri Lanka, marching through thick jungles, should be obvious even to a cursory reader. The story of the *Ramayana* is no doubt a myth constructed to deal conceptually with relations between the invading Aryan-speaking tribes and the native ones. Historians and mythologists have demolished the claim that the island across the Palk Straits is the Lanka of the *Ramayana*. (H.D. Sankalia, for instance). "Lanka" probably meant "land across the water – even a river — across which the Dasyus lived, separated from the invaders. Again even if this version of the "history" of the Tamils in Sri Lanka can be granted for argument's sake, it is still as totally irrelevant for the construction of a modern Sri Lankan nation as the stories

in the *Mahavamsa*. Incidentally, *Yalpana Vaipa Malai* details another story that should give some ammunition to the Sinhala nationalists: Yalpanam was given as a *donation* or *grant* to the Yarl-player (lute player) called Yarljadi by the Sinhala king Wasaba! If this story has any merit, it means that the territory that came to be known as Yarlpananam was under the control of Wasaba. If it can be given, it can also be taken back since no royal grant is given in perpetuity but only for services rendered.

While this claim of Tamils as primordial inhabitants of the island has been one strand of the Tamil discourse, the other thread has been the claim of "traditional homelands." These claims were made in the fifties of the last century and used to describe a limited territory, the North and East of the island as such a homeland. Besides demographics, a hard document was available to make this claim — the Cleghorn minute. Cleghorn was a British civil servant who after years of service on the island had concluded that there were two distinct "nations" in the island, one Tamil, which occupied the Northern peninsula and the Eastern seaboard and the Sinhalese who occupied the rest. This document is of dubious value since we really don't know what Cleghorn meant by the word "nation". Then, as now, this is an ambiguous concept and the referent is uncertain. If however one grants the Tamil interpretation of the significance of this document, for the sake of argument, it has no merit in the construction of a modern nation state. In fact I think the Tamil leadership made tactical error in basing their struggle on a claim to territory rather than basing it on human rights and citizenship. The Tamil claim too, is, once again, as with that of the Sinhalese, based on a claim of primordial property rights. Such a claim does not take into account the changes that have taken place since the Cleghorn minute was written. The people who lived there at the time of the Cleghorn's observations are no longer there and for the claim of the Tamil nationalists to have any weight, they must be presumed to have passed their rights to succeeding generations as property.

The Sinhala claims and the Tamil claims in this regard have been endlessly debated with each side seeking to demolish the argument of the other with dubious data and specious logic — best called chauvinistic — and anachronistic stereotyping. Every fact on the ground that any nation-builder must recognize is that the island is inhabited by a variety of people distinguished by ethnicity, language-preference, religion, region, caste and even historical presence. They are all here now and they have no intention of leaving. It would be an excellent state of affairs for a country to have no such significant differences — like Sweden, Norway, Greenland or Iceland, etc. In Sri Lanka, that is not the case and we have to learn to live with it and make the most of it to construct a workable nation-state.

## What then are the facts on the ground?

1. If the island contained only Govigama Sinhalese Buddhists, all of them owning enough fruitful land, and all of them forever young and beautiful, there would perhaps be no need for political machinery in the island! The ground is, in fact, constituted by many subdivisions: Sinhalese, Muslims, Tamils, Burghers, Malays, not to speak of Veddhas, Sinhala Veddhas, Tamil Veddhas as well as assimilated Veddhas. Further, there are low country Sinhalese, Kandyan Sinhalese, Eastern Tamils, Jaffna Tamils, Vanni Tamils, Muslims of different sects and ethnicities; and Burghers, Dutch and Portuguese, not to speak of Sinhals with Portuguese names, and others of ambiguous ancestry. Then, there are Buddhists with varying commitment to the doctrine, Christians of many denominations and varying commitments, Hindus of many stripes and perhaps a smattering of atheists, agnostics and animists. They will always be there in the island and they can be neither obliterated or their rights undermined by “majority vote”. Deny them their claims, and the state will be forever faced with resistance of some sort or another. The situation on the ground in the island, for good or ill, is not then an ethnically, religiously, or linguistically homogeneous system. The majority may be Sinhalese and they could continue to win elections, but the construction of a viable nation is not a matter of winning elections. Rather, it is the construction of national system in which the various heterogeneous elements arrive, not at homogeneity or even a harmony, but at a working consensus. This only means that, neither legally nor in practice, is any one is allowed to become a victim of deliberate discrimination and exclusion.

2. The island is not just an island in the ocean. It is part of the global economic system and is heavily dependent, whether we like it or not, on the world economic system the island not only dependent on exports but is also locked into the international monetary system. It has to send a large number of its workers and professionals to work overseas in order to sustain its economy. None of these facts is likely to change in the immediate future. A relatively powerless country, small in its natural resources, cannot, defy what I will call, without too much cynicism, “international morality” for too long (except for Israel!) The embededness of the island’s economic well-being in the international systems should necessarily influence, to some extent at least, the national policy it has to follow. If we do not do this everyone –Sinhalese included, will pay a heavy price in the short run as in the long one.

3. The next aspect of the situation in the ground is that demographically the island has a population that is distributed in such a way that while the majority of Sinhalese live in most of the provinces of the island, the Tamils, though concentrated in the North and Eastern regions, live also in the rest of the island. If one takes into account, the Tamils who live in the central highland, it appears more Tamils live outside the North

and East than in them. Further, these Tamils, not only live there, but also own property there and are committed to living there. This fact must be recognized. This is a fact that not only Tamil leadership should take into account but also the Sinhalese leadership, both the political one and the cognoscenti and the agitators in the media.

The ethnic “history” notwithstanding, any attempt to construct a nation must take these material facts and a few others perhaps too, – into account. Such accounting does not depend on the numerical superiority of one group over another. A working machinery must be found to accommodate as far as possible, the interests of all the divisions and sub-divisions the people of the island. Whether one belongs to a majority community or not, there will not be a relatively peaceful society unless the interests of everyone are taken into account. Majorities only decide elections among different people who differ on matters of policy not fundamental rights. They cannot, by the nature of the case, diminish or obliterate the interests of a non-majority or exterminate them, at least not these days. If a state tries to do that, there will always be resistance – armed or not. No functioning state can carry on with a permanently disgruntled group in its midst – moreover a group with strong ties to powerful outside forces.

In the present history of Sri Lanka, the moves that the state should take are relatively simple, and in terms of cost-benefit analysis, parsimonious:

- a) Make Sinhalese, Tamil, and English the official language of the country and implement this in *practice* in every possible way in all parts of the country. It is not enough to pass a law and leave it there.
- b) Recognize the regional concentration of people who consider themselves homogenous communities. Construct regional administrative systems with relative autonomy.
- c) Appoint Tamil-speaking people to all government offices.
- d) Undertaking a massive program of reconstruction and development of the land devastated and depopulated by mindless fanaticism of the militants and the ruthless repression by the state over the last thirty years—not just the last four years. Of course, war is war and war is hell and destruction and civilians do get killed and war has its own logic. But peace is also peace and peace and reconciliation demand reconstruction and rebuilding without any reservations – not pious statements and mischievous and destructive myths but practical and concrete steps. Further, it is time to stop fighting the last war and take radical steps to prevent further conflicts.
- e) Encourage the intellectuals and journalists and other scribes to systematically create an ideology and a *new* political myth that is truly inclusive of all the communities in the island – instead of doing the opposite as many are doing now. The

battle for a new nation must begin at the level of discourse, communication, agendas and above all, right speech and consequent actions.

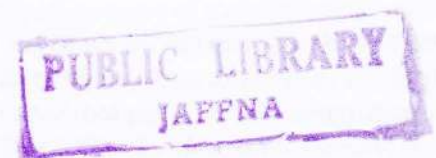
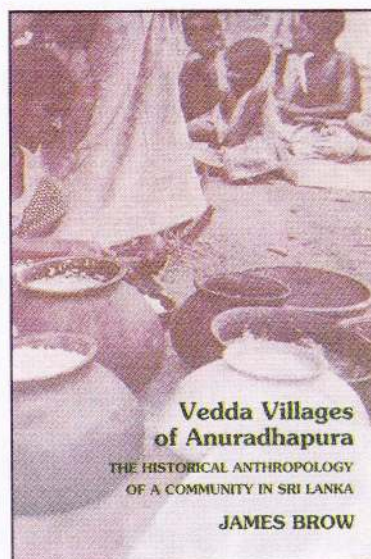
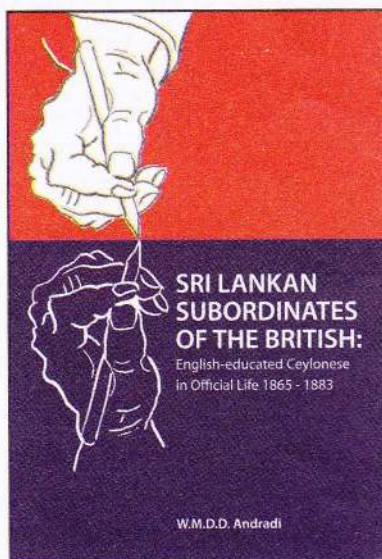
f) Discourage the preaching of exclusivist and supremacist ideology. This discourse is truly not necessary insofar as the Sinhala community is dominant enough in the country and is indeed counterproductive. It merely frightens the minorities without too many practical or psychic rewards for the community – except for these demented scribes. Indeed it puts Sinhala community constantly on the defensive, having thus to proclaim their uniqueness all the time! Whatever happens, the Sinhalese will always be supreme in the island. This is not going to change in the foreseeable future. Colvin R de Silva, lawyer, politician and versatile scholar, once remarked: "In this little country, history has given the Sinhalese race the position of being a majority with the characteristic of a minority. The Sinhalese nurse this sense of peril, a belief that, like the Jews, history has vested them with a role of maintaining their traditions." (New York Times Magazine, December, 13<sup>th</sup>, 1987) I think the Sinhalese can rest assured that their super-majority status can never be withered away. Marx notwithstanding, history does not repeat itself, either as tragedy or farce. History repeats itself only in the work of historians and more often in the tendentious and fevered imaginations of rabble-rousing scribes. *Every moment in the story of a nation is unique in its configurations and the problems they engender demand equally unique solutions.* I am certain that Cholas are not coming back any time soon to re-conquer the island nor are the Kalingas coming back to destroy Buddhist monuments. The Portuguese,

the Hollanders and the British are not coming back either, though, I am sure, that the many Christians in our midst are happy that they came and gave them a religion that they cherish. Further, the slight advantage that the Jaffna Tamils had in entering the professions and government service, thanks to the Christian missionaries, has evaporated completely. The Sinhalese are not in any danger of being overwhelmed by the Damilas or the Christians or the Muslims. There is no basis for having this "sense of peril" and this "minority psychology" that Colvin R de Silva discussed. It is the real minorities who feel this sense of peril: the slow assimilation of many members of the minority communities into the mainstream, as has happened in the past.

Overcoming this psychology will of course mean "be generous and kind to those in the minority" – not just the Tamils, but others too — and do everything possible to incorporate them into the nation, since the Sinhalese can well afford it. *To claim that some of the steps mentioned above are already under way is unacceptable; these steps must be taken with deep commitment and with enthusiasm in the practical realm, rather than in the form of pious declarations, sanctimonious editorials and unenforced legislative enactments.* It is not action alone but the right action that is the need of the hour. It is time to control the *Krodh* and put *Metha, Mudita and Karuna* into practice rather than proclaiming them in books, tracts and sermons – not to speak of wisdom. Diligently maintaining permanently disgruntled minorities is neither good politics nor a wise use of the material, intellectual and emotional resources of the nation. ■

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