

of belligerent elites abroad and sets them right with straight talk backed by technical truths: we've "gamed" you to death, he says, a statement to which there can be no response.

What Hersh tells them is a vision of the New World Order, of, in other words, the ideological production of a new basis of US imperialism. In brief outline it appears to be like this. The underlying assumption is that a system of governance based on law cannot be bad. Of course, the system itself can be prone to subversion, but the morally justified position will always come through.

The perfect example is the tale presented above. Barlow, the wronged citizen domestically, is ultimately vindicated by the actions of the wronged official, Gates abroad. Gates's mission abroad cannot be wrong, for he is backed by US truths about the dangers of nuclear weapons, historical knowledge of what can happen in cases of assumed misperception, and finally, by scientifically produced information about the "true" state of affairs. These truths feed back to Barlow, his shattered career notwithstanding, and to bolster a new legitimacy for the resilience of US law—the evidence of which has come from abroad.

ETHNICITY, CLASS, RELIGION AND GENDER: QUERIES AND NON-ANSWERS

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The above title for a short article like this should not give the readers an impression that I intend to tackle or deal with grand narratives. Neither should they entertain any hopes that I will ground my propositions and arguments on metatheories of legitimation. What I propose to do here is to share some ad hoc strands of thought, some thoughts of anger, frustration and dire helplessness. These feelings go beyond scientific theories. In narrating them as mere experiences I do realise that they are not the outbursts of an impotent mind.

As someone belonging to the Women's Education and Research Centre abbreviatively called the WERC, I was responsible for organising a project for the refugee children in Colombo. When the refugees were "camped" in the various refugee centres, one of the problems identified by Women's Education and Research Centre was the lack of Educational facilities for girls. Hence we launched a project to have classes in our centre to teach them English and Sinhalese as Second languages. The classes in Sinhala were arranged only after their consensus was sought. This was to prevent us imposing our ideology of peaceful multi-ethnic co-existence on some people, though children, who might have different perceptions at this point of our history. Such an imposition would have had political implication such as imposing the language of the oppressor on innocent little girls of the oppressed nation! The children were all Tamil. The Women's Education and Research Centre staff and the Sinhalese Directors were deeply involved in the educative and the administrative process and in the successful

implementation of the project. There were Tamils who taught them Tamil and Maths, Social Studies and Religion. The involvement of the teacher and administrators was positive, intensive and inter-active.

The children learnt to smile and laugh and play. The blank, expressionless girls had over time learnt to express, talk and laugh. The little minds would have seen different Sinhalese, people different from the image they would have built up so long by the political propaganda and by their own experience of overt and covert violence. This project covered only the two camps which are near our Centre.

Meanwhile we came to know that the Muslim children in another "camp" were also in a similar plight and there were requests to include them also in our project. We were prepared to stretch our minds, funds and services and readily accepted them into our fold. The little head-covering girls, burdened as they were physically in addition to their horrible experience of mental agony, walked sorrowfully in to Women's Education and Research Centre. The head covering symbols, we were told, were politically instituted on an argument of ethno-cultural identity on these children who had no say in the matter. The symbol signified exclusive ethno-cultural identity. The children told us while they were in Jaffna they were not wearing this symbol. It would appear that the assertion of separate ethno-cultural identity through symbols that affect only women and manifest as signs of gender subordination came up only after being driven out of the "Tamil Homeland" by the LTTE. Hence this sign of exclusive ethno-cultural signification of gender repression and constraints on the free movement of young children had to be continued and contained. Contained,

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lest our concern would have been interpreted as interference into the ethno-cultural identity of a group of people whose identity is in crisis. The children would have been prevented from attending the classes at WERC if WERC was heard or found to be interfering with the "personal". We could not politicise the personal at this juncture. In the name of respecting other people's culture we have to contain our feminist consciousness. Gender identity and cultural identity were at loggerheads. Though painful to see the little girls in purdah, we continued our classes.

However, we were confronted with the problem of space in our little office. As the number of children increased our only alternative was to seek another institution in the neighbourhood that imparts education. I approached a school principal who is known to me and was my contemporary in the university. This principal I was told is acting for the principal who was out of the country on leave. I decided to shift the Tamil children to the school which was close to the refugee centre and have classes for the Muslim children in our centre.

I visited the principal of this school and explained our project, our activities, and finally of the progress the children had made in social interaction. In my enthusiasm, being an active witness to the social, psychological development in the children and in their manner of behaviour, I talked at length with the mistaken notion that as a teacher, principal and educator of the community, she would have been happy. I talked at length about the disadvantaged children, their becoming victims of senseless violence, about the breakdown of isolation, about the improvement in their health (we had a nutritional program in addition to the class room teaching), the overcoming of the fear of psychosis (we had psychiatric counselling for them) and when I finished I noticed the coldness in her bespectacled eyes. The response was hard and unsympathetic in the manner of feelings and emotion. But her words were the hardest. My question to her was whether, in the afternoon when the school is not in session, we could use one class room to teach the Tamil children, in view of our decision to include the Muslim children into our project.

The principal is a Tamil Hindu. Does this have any significance one might ask. But the children are all Tamils and Hindu. The school is a Tamil Hindu institution! The principal is a she. Multiple identities of ethnicity, religion and gender.

Her words were the hardest. She began by saying "We have no classroom, we have to get permission from the Ministry of Education". I promptly interrupted, "That is easy, I can do that." She concluded, "You know if you bring those children from the refugee camps into **my** (emphasis hers and mine) school they will spread all kinds of infectious diseases like sore eyes etc, that will create problems in **my** school. I was shocked. Her dispassionate and unsympathetic words rendered me

speechless. At once I left the school, angered frustrated and with an overwhelming feeling of helplessness.

My helplessness was turned into determinism. We at WERC made adjustments, adjustments in time table, adjustments with the teaching staff, and adjustments with the staff at WERC. We started the classes at 7.30 and had additional classes during office hours in one section and continued and completed our task till the end of the year when the children had all got admission to various schools and they have caught up with the lessons which they have missed for nearly nine months due to their displacements.

This was not all I had to encounter, but also similar problems with regard to the education of a child from the marginalised section in our country. Unable to bear the double burden, I was looking out for an elderly woman who could share household responsibilities with me. I got an eleven year old girl! On inquiries I came to know that due to poverty the parents had sent her to work as a servant after removing her from school. My attempts to send her back to her parents, to let her continue her studies, proved futile. The parents it appeared were keen to reduce the number they had to feed and clothe at home. Hence I decided to keep her at home and send her to school, I had to meet the same principal again, now I thought, with a more legitimate need to provide education for a child who wants to study and who has stopped schooling due to the need to earn for her parents and sisters and brothers.

In a country which boasts of its free education policy and high rate of literacy and where it is mandatory that children should be given an education till they are fourteen, I thought mine was a legitimate demand.

At the outset, I explained to her the circumstances under which I have come to seek admission to her school and who the applicant was. She had more than one reason to offer.

"There are insufficient teachers in the school. The number of students in the classes are too big to handle. We don't have enough class room space."

However, she concluded that she will try. When I sent in the application with the relevant documents such as the school leaving certificate and the birth certificate, they were promptly returned saying that she was over-age for the class. This was after I explained that she had missed one year of schooling.

To some one who was educated under the cadjan-leaf halls, and when the school was once burnt down, under the shade of the trees and, in the playground (if found necessary), after school hours with the main motive that children's education should be prioritised under any circumstances, to some one who was exposed constantly to the attitudes of teachers and principals who did every thing such as paying the facilities fees of those who could not afford to pay them to finding accommodation to

children under very trying conditions either in their own schools or in the schools of their colleagues, by persuasion and commitment, the rejection of this application, the off-handish manner in which it was rejected was painfully shocking.

I was hurt and angry and frustrated but did not feel helpless. I went to many Tamil schools from Colombo 6 to Colombo 3 with requests to admit this child. I would have normally thought that it is her right that she and I should demand. While doing so I was asking myself the following questions.

Had I told the principal that I needed admission for my daughter or my niece, would she have any how found the accommodation?

I was confronted again with a similar situation in a convent. But the implications of the encounter this time are different. The Rev. sister was very sympathetic and was able to somehow find a place in the grade she had to be admitted to, though the class was already full. And when she realised that she was not a Christian or Catholic but a Hindu, she promptly and hastily revealed the bitter truth that they do not admit non-Christians in that school.

"There are many schools for Hindu children, but there are only a few Christian and Catholic schools, hence you had to go to a Hindu school to get admission for a Hindu child."

I was not sure whether Hindu schools reject Christian or Catholics on the basis of faith. This Reverend Sister sympathized with the poverty of the child and admired her keenness to study, but a Catholic she has to be to realise the fruits of her compassion and sympathy. She took it for granted that I have gone to seek admission for a Catholic child.

I went back again hurt and angered but my frustrations now turned into determinism somehow to accomplish my task. While I went out of the gates this time a few more questions kept coming up from my confused self.

Can a head of an educational institution reject admission on ground of religion or ethnicity, class or caste in Sri Lanka? Are the convents not under the jurisprudence of the Ministry of Education? What is the policy of the government with regard to private schools?

The last question was, would the Sister have given admission if I agreed to let her convert this child into the true religion of hers?

My intuitive answer to the last question was in the affirmative in view of some of the conversions which have taken place in the refugee camps purely for economic and material benefits. My frustrating experiences, however came to an end when the principal I met next, also from a Christian state school, admitted the child with no questions asked about her age, religion or class. All that mattered to her was that there is a child who

wants to re-enter school to continue her disrupted education. And let me add, the child who had missed nearly an year of schooling has now adapted herself to the standards required and the progress reports from her teachers and principal are very complementary.

My complacency and happiness at fulfilling the task however was shaken when I met my friend, who had returned from U.K. She in fact was the principal of the Hindu School I approached first and she was on leave. I had to mention here that like me, she too was exposed to different culture and traditions of dedicated teachers and exemplary principals who had very effective roles to play in the history of high standards of education in the Northern province. I complained to her about the attitude of her acting principal towards the admission of a child who is poor and wants to study. I was angry again when I was told the following. When my friend visited the school the acting principal had told her:

"Your friend came to ask for help — She wanted to admit someone. You know we have brought the standard of the school to these levels, how can we now take such children and lower the standard of our school?"

So it would appear (no grand theories) that class was deterministic in this instance. There was no ethnic and religious solidarity present even in these times of nationalism and cultural identity. In the case of the Catholic nun it was a case of religious chauvinism.

My conclusions then (still inconclusive) are merely questions.

What is more deterministic? Nationalism? Ethno-linguism? Religious Nationalism? Or is class more deterministic? Is religious fundamentalism like the Catholic nun's opinion and like the little Muslim maids - in - purdah more deterministic?

However, I still remain angry and frustrated, because the grand narratives and theories do not give answer to any queries in addition to the painful journey I had to undertake to educate just one child in Sri Lanka.

Before concluding I have to stress that the Sinhala directors of the WERC continued the refugee education project under severe constraints of space and time. The determination of the WERC's multi-ethnic and multi religious staff continued to see the project progress satisfactorily. The right kind of mental attitudes and the correct ideology which transgresses narrow concepts of nationalism, ethnic and religious identity have proved very effective towards progress. Narrow isms are no answers. Humanism should become the only ism and I can now reiterate my belief in this ism and condemn the folly of speaking of nationalism when there are many deprivations among us. Theories of linguistic nationalism, cultural identity and religious solidarity that were heaped by the so called intellectuals need to be challenged. The non-answers, over time and very soon should become the answers.