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Pravada in contemporary Sinhalese usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

THE PEACE OFFENSIVE

Once again, the question of the question of Sri Lankan politics has come to the fore: should there be, or can there be, a political settlement to the ethnic conflict? Opinions, as usual, are sharply divided. What is more, a new wave of militant Sinhalese nationalism, based on opposition to non-military options to the war, is being generated in the South.

In a society where inter-ethnic relations have been seriously eroded, it is no easy task to make an ideational intervention favouring negotiations between warring ethnic groups. When the talking is mainly through automatic guns, even the utterances of religious leaders acquire the ferocity of bullets. Hence the bellicose preaching of a leading scholar monk - 'War Now - Peace Later.'

We must, nevertheless, not lose sight of the crucial need for making the very notion of a political settlement accepted by the people. Taking a careful look at the sources of war-mongering today, it is not difficult to observe that in both Sinhala and Tamil societies, only a small minority of the population would seriously oppose a negotiated political settlement.

And indeed, people have come to realise the sheer futility of a war which for nearly ten years has not given them any respite. For the Tamil people in the North-East, the promise of an Eelam is now a nightmare. They are perhaps a community destined to be tragically unique in the sense that they have suffered tremendously at the hands of both the adversary and the liberator(s). For the Muslims living in predominantly Tamil areas and caught up in a battle they never wanted, life itself has ceased to be secure. They are being evicted from settlements

where they had lived for generations in peace with Sinhala and Tamil communities.

For the Sinhalese? The peasants in border areas like Kantalai have been subjected to massacres. Even people living in Colombo and elsewhere in the South, far from the actual theatre of conflict, have fallen victim to, or at least been shocked by, massive bomb blasts. Funerals of young soldiers, brought back to villages in sealed coffins, have been a fairly regular occurrence which no doubt has made Sinhalese Buddhist people realise, not just the impermanence of life, but essentially the cruel reality of a conflict built on notions of permanent identities.

The collective memories of suffering endured by people of all communities have probably been strong enough to dissuade them from taking part in ethnic riots that extremist forces would delight in instigating. It is indeed a positive feature in our mass political behaviour that despite provocations, there has been no repetition of July 1983.

The vast majority of combatants killed or maimed in the battle, whether they are LTTE fighters or members of the Sri Lankan armed forces, are young children of poor families. Beneath the veils of ethno-ideological identity labels - lions and tigers - are the unemployed youths of peasant families from Point Pedro to Tissamaharama. Yet, the sectarian and exclusivist ideologies of race, nation, country etc., are produced and energetically disseminated by those who enjoy social cushioning from, or are immune to, any direct personal suffering in this conflict.



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Editors

Charles Abeysekera
Shani Jayawardena
Jayadeva Uyangoda

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PEACE.....

The political elite needs mobilising ideologies and they - living in well-fortified bunkers in Jaffna or well-appointed colonial mansions in Colombo and Kandy - can afford to preach war. But not so with the ordinary masses. The people living in war-ravaged districts, whether Jaffna, Amparai, or border villages of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa districts, need peace as a necessary requisite of even day-to-day existence. The time has come for all of us to take a fresh look at the whole conflict from the point of view of the people affected by it and not in terms of such ideological abstractions as country, homeland, race, nation, religion, sovereignty etc.

The point we want to make is that, despite evidence of a further hardening of hardline chauvinistic positions by some sections of the political and social elites, there exists a reservoir of support for a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic question. It still remains untapped. The misfortune then is that political parties, supposedly the political expression of the will of the

people, are still reluctant to appeal to the democratic and peace sentiments of the people. The fear of losing elections or the desire for power, shared by all political parties, has left a wide open space for Sinhalese ideologues of the extremist kind to dominate the present political debate.

Nevertheless, consensual intervention by political parties, based on an acceptance of the principle of a negotiated political settlement, still remains within the realm of possibility. President Premadasa's occasional speeches on the conflict appear to be carefully drafted so as to keep a political option open. His latest formulation, 'a multi-lateral solution', implies consensus seeking at the political level.

The SLFP leadership too appears to be keen on keeping its options; this can be deduced from its reluctance to associate itself with the militaristic campaign of Sinhalese hardliners, although a group of its MPs are reported to have formed a new organisation called *Hela Urumaya* (The Sinhala Heritage). The newly formed DUNF, the third major Sinhalese political formation, also claims to be searching for a political solution.

The most optimistic reading of the fact that these parties have not yet joined the band-wagon of Rahula, Jayasooriya, Amarasekera *et al.* is that the chemistry of Sri Lankan politics is likely to change for the better.

Pessimism, however, is the other side of optimism, particularly when it comes to Sri Lanka's ethnic politics. No one can be certain how long the major Sinhalese political parties will desist from associating themselves with the new Sinhalese chauvinistic build-up. Running the danger of being swept off their feet by the chauvinistic mobilisation are particularly the SLFP and the DUNF whose electoral agendas are intimately linked with anti-UNP campaigns.

The anti-government character has been an aspect of Sinhalese patriotic politics in recent years; it has become customary to accuse the UNP regime of being unmindful of majority interests. One important facet of the present political debate is a rather unwelcome tendency to view Mr.

Premadasa's administration as being unnecessarily sympathetic towards minority interests. The critics of the Thondaman proposals have already made the point that the minority leaders should not be allowed to emerge as powerful political brokers to the detriment of the Sinhalese majority. Meanwhile, the growing social frustration over the economic policies of the Premadasa administration may well provide a fertile ground for turning actual social grievances into the channels of ethnic hatred and narrow patriotism.

Pessimism is possible because of a particular politico-ideological vacuum that presently exists in the Sinhalese South. There is no moderate Sinhalese nationalist ideology or movement that can channel Sinhalese nationalist emotions and energies in a constructive direction in order that minority fears are allayed and the anxieties of the majority are rationally dealt with. Nor is there a likelihood of one emerging in the foreseeable future.

Tamil nationalism, in contrast, has now moved significantly away from its once uncompromisingly militant posture, leaving only the LTTE to represent ultra-nationalistic intransigence. Reports coming from the North are replete with sentiments, being expressed by the Tamil populace, of political moderation. The real problem in the South is the absence of a Sinhalese movement for accommodationist moderation that is capable of appreciating the welcome changes taking place in Tamil nationalism in particular and ethnic politics in general.

It is precisely against this background that the major political parties of the South have a responsibility to come to a consensus on the need for a political solution to the ethnic problem. As Mr. Thondaman may have also read it, the present conjuncture is favourable for the opening up of a new political front with regard to the ethnic question. It is favourable because, more than ever before, there exists now a popular willingness to grant legitimacy to a negotiated political settlement. Once this opportunity is lost, it is very unlikely that a similar one would emerge in the near future.

It would not, perhaps, be very prudent to wait for the Parliamentary Select Commit-

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tee to come out with its proposals. If the parties can make a clear commitment to a general framework of a solution (enhanced devolution or federalism), it will be a tremendous step in the right direction which would also set the proper context for the Moonesinghe Committee to conceptualise its own approach towards its terms of reference.

Once the principle of a political solution and its general framework are accepted,

the second step would be the working out of modalities for negotiations. To negotiate with whom, on what concrete issues and with what kind of guarantees are obviously matters that would need the patient attention of all major political actors. A group of Sri Lankan Tamil scholars living in the United States has made an excellent set of recommendations in this regard which we publish in this issue.

And indeed, a broadened framework of negotiations, with international mediation

and guarantees, would also address some of the anxieties now being expressed by Sinhalese nationalist spokespersons. With justification, Sinhalese people do not trust the LTTE. Any unilateral negotiations with the LTTE, without proper and adequate political safeguards, are certain to be resented in the South. However, the doubts and reservations of the Sinhalese people are not insurmountable, once confidence in a political solution has been created. **P**

“THERE CAN BE NO MILITARY SOLUTION ...”

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE GOVERNMENT OF SRI LANKA, AND TAMIL POLITICAL PARTIES AND ORGANISATIONS

We call on the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to initiate a peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict.

We strongly condemn the resurgence of Sinhala chauvinistic opposition to a negotiated settlement.

We call for a broadening of the framework of negotiations to include Tamil civil organisations, who also represent the interests of the Tamil people.

The immense suffering of Tamils during the decade long ethnic conflict includes indiscriminate killings, imprisonment and torture of tens of thousands of Tamils by Sri Lankan armed forces, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Tamils. Living conditions in the North and East have deteriorated drastically, with severe shortages of basic foodstuffs, medicine, electricity and means of transportation. The greater misery experienced by women and children during the war is evidenced by the increasing number of women refugees, and the increase in infant and maternal mortality. Tamils have lost an entire generation of youth either as victims of violence or as participants.

The armed response of the LTTE, however, has included massacres of innocent Sinhala

villagers, and the torture and killing of prisoners. Recently, tens of thousands of Muslims were forcibly evicted from their homes and expelled from the North, while several hundreds were killed in the East. The LTTE has also been responsible for the imprisonment and death of student leaders, women's rights activists and human rights activists. Other Tamil political organisations, such as the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) have also contributed to the pursuit of vengeful politics, to the detriment of democracy in the North and East,

Further, caste discrimination continues to be a major obstacle to socio-economic advancement for a significant section of the Tamil community. Tamil women who have organised themselves autonomously for women's rights or against the war have been suppressed. The exclusionary basis of Tamil nationalism has been hostile to Muslims and has led to a breakdown in Tamil-Muslim solidarity, exacerbating the problem of achieving peace in the North and East. Finally, the sympathy of the international community for the suffering of Tamils has been eroded by the militarism of the Tamil nationalist movement.

We feel the nature of the LTTE response to Sinhala chauvinism raised important ques-

tions about Tamil nationalism that have not been sufficiently addressed. How has the development of Tamil nationalism alienated Muslims of the North and East? Why has the claim to a traditional Tamil homeland led to the expulsion of Sinhalese and Muslims who have been living in the North and East for generations? Do the demands of the Tamil nationalist movement reflect the aspirations of the Tamil people of the East, or do they only express the will of its Jaffna leadership? And why have the interests of women and “depressed” castes not been represented by the Tamil nationalist movement?

Today, the North and East have become a wasteland, devastated by the armed forces of the Sri Lankan state and silenced by the LTTE's suppression of all alternative political voices.

Recommendations:

We call on the Government and the LTTE to cease hostilities and to release political prisoners.

We urge both parties to facilitate the transportation of food, medical supplies and fuel to the North and East.