

# STATE AND NATION: THE NATION STATE AND THE STATE OF OUR NATION

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1. A state is a juristic entity, the construction of statesmen and politicians aimed at consolidating and exercising power. Its defining characteristic is the exclusive possession of armed force which could be deployed against external adversaries or defiant subjects. The state as it is known today is not of great antiquity being, perhaps, less than 250 years old.

2. A nation, on the other hand, is a societal entity which has evolved over time (and continues to evolve) through the varied contributions of the men, women and children who regard themselves instinctively as part of that nation. It has attributes such as a territory of domicile, an unique language and culture and an ethnic identity. It is pervaded by humane considerations rather than by monopolistic possession and exercise of power.

3. Ideally state and nation should be in harmony and should be mutually supportive - the state fostering the material and moral objectives of the nation and the nation ceding to the state the wherewithal for the possession and exercise of power.

4. This ideal is seldom realised for many reasons. Foremost among them is the fact that the state is clearly and concretely organised and consequently acquires a mind of its own whereas a nation is an amorphous agglomeration. The persons who wield the monopolistic power of the state are often corrupted by power and tend to regard the state as superior to the nation.

5. Another reason is that often the state is made up of many nations for historical reasons. There are multi-national states of all kinds - multi-national kingdoms (the U.K., Belgium, The Netherlands, Spain), multi-national republics (The Russian Federation, The Indian Union, Sudan, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia etc). In such cases, as a matter of course, the state dominates the constituent nations. With the heightening of nationalistic feelings which are by their very nature individualistic (a multi-national nation is a contradiction in terms), tensions arise within states, between the state on the one hand and one or more of the constituent nations on the other. These tensions are manifested through the political process of the state and have a very real potential for eventual war between state and nation (Bosnia, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, The Sudan etc) and the ultimate break-up of the state. In many cases the break-up is effected before the outbreak of war and so averts that calamity (The Federated Malay States, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia).

6. In Sri Lanka the state is made up of two well-defined nations, clearly distinct in every attribute of nationhood including territory of domicile. The rising nationalistic urges of both nations have resulted in the state identifying with the large nation, the Sinhala,

and attempting to subjugate the other by armed force. The tension between the two nations has bedeviled politics in Sri Lanka from the very first year of independence and escalated into open warfare in 1983.

7. The war continues to sputter on as the Sri Lankan state, which ranks among the 50 poorest states in the world, is unable to do more than mount an offensive once in 6 months or so and for the rest of the time maintain a holding operation in a low-intensity war. It is unable to comprehend the nature of the conflict, to confront the reality of its own weakness and, least of all, to contemplate the only available course to peace which is the splitting up of the state into two - each new state corresponding to the nation upon which it is based.

## The Nation State

8. The French Revolution of 1789 is regarded as the great watershed from which emerged both nationalism and the modern state and especially the combination of the two. Militant nationalism needed the power of the state for self-expression and the realisation of its international goals; the state needed the backing of a nation in arms.

9. The nation-state was essentially a militant entity well-suited for expansionist adventures. It was the instrument **par excellence** for European empire building. The state took the leading role and even multi-national states such as the U.K. displayed the militant characteristics of single-nation states.

10. No nation is ethnically homogenous, not even Japan which comes closest to this theoretical ideal. All have within them extraneous elements which co-habit amicably with the larger whole for reasons of convenience or deliberate social choice etc. Every nation is able to harbour such consenting elements within itself and continue to preserve its national identity. This is precisely the case with both Sinhala and Tamil nations in Sri Lanka.

11. The Sinhala nation contains within it around one million Tamil persons of recent Indian origin on the plantations and around half a million Tamil persons of indigenous origin. It also contains around half a million persons of the Islamic faith some of whom are of Arab descent and others of Tamil origin.

12. Likewise, the Tamil nation has in its midst around a quarter of a million Sinhala persons and around half a million persons of the Islamic faith, mostly of Tamil ethnic origin and all of whom speak Tamil and have contributed to Tamil literature on the island.

14. The Sri Lankan state is a multi-national state comprising two nations - the Sinhala and the Tamil. Their presence within the single state is the product of British colonial history. The only possibility of the peaceful co-existence of these two nations upon the island is for each to be released from the straitjacket of the single all-island state and to have a state of its own i.e. two nation-states each based upon its own nation. The establishment and fostering of mutually supportive good neighbourly relations between them should be entirely possible as has been the case with all newly emergent nations following such break-ups whether forced by war or negotiated peacefully.

## The State of Our Nation

15. The nation here referred to is the Sinhala nation.

16. The state of the Sinhala nation today is dire indeed. It subsists on a series of myths which are universally believed but which are strikingly at variance with manifest reality.

17. The first is that it has some kind of divine right to the whole island. The overwhelming majority of the Sinhala people have not set foot in the neighboring territory of Tamil domicile; for several thousand years they have not possessed, or lived in, that area. Today, there cannot be a single young man or young woman of the Sinhala nation who would accept a piece of land in that area in preference to regular, modern, employment near his/her home. The proposition that the Sinhala nation cannot survive, or will be grievously weakened, without possession or control over the area of Tamil domicile is an egregious myth the belief in which must call in question the sanity of our entire nation.

18. The overwhelming majority of the Sinhala people are of the Buddhist religion. They believe that Buddhism will be endangered if there were to be on the island a neighboring state whose population is overwhelmingly of the Hindu religion. This is about as far from reality as one can get. No religion is under threat today from any other religion. There are laws against religious proselytization which have not been invoked for lack of need to do so. However, all religions, including Buddhism, are threatened by the modern wave of secularism and materialism. That is the threat to which Islam has reacted so fiercely by its fundamentalist revival. Both Buddhism and Hinduism are equally threatened by the anti-religious trends of the modern world. What little understanding they have of this threat and how little they are able to cope with it is vividly portrayed by Buddhism's attempt to seek salvation through state patronage. The state's victory in the war is regarded as vital for Buddhism's survival; hardly anybody notices the mental confusion on which such a thought is based.

19. The Sinhala nation has an exceedingly insular world-view. It has no clear comprehension that it is a very poor nation and one that is losing ground rapidly to other nations which deliver a steadily improving quality of life to their peoples. It is aware that the war in which it is engaged is a drain on its resources but it has not the remotest suspicion that its paucity of material and financial resources make it absolutely impossible for it to bring the war to a

victorious conclusion. Its mind-set is confined to the most primitive form of magnitudinism which suggests that since the Sinhala nation is bigger and richer than its adversary it will win, if not in the short term, at least eventually. The Sinhala nation is quite unaware that this conviction is the very opposite of the world's recent experience which is that the state, despite its superiority in every known measure of strength has always, without exception, succumbed to its nationalist, secessionist, guerilla adversary fighting on his home ground in every war of this type that has been concluded. No Sinhala leader has ever said this to his/her people. The entire nation lives in a land of military fiction, oblivious of the military reality in the rest of the world.

20. The whole Sinhala nation (with very few exceptions who in any case are too timid to be vocal) believes that Tamil nationalism and separatism are immoral and criminal and that they can be extirpated from the body politic by military force. No one seems to be aware that nationalism and nationalist, secessionist guerillas thrive on military defeat and re-bounce all the stronger for it. It is a paradox difficult to understand except by reference to the Sinhala nation's own recent, immediate, experience. Despite all the stunning reverses suffered by the LTTE over nearly 13 years of warfare it is stronger now than it ever was. Our best efforts have strengthened, not weakened, our adversary. It is this paradox that has made nationalism the most powerful and disruptive force of the 20th century and its course is only just beginning to run; it is waxing, not waning, worldwide. The Sinhala nation is sublimely ignorant of this, reality.

21. The entire Sinhala nation is absolutely convinced that securing peace by separation into two states will irretrievably impoverish it. It believes that the island of Sri Lanka is small; if the Sinhala state were to be smaller still it must necessarily be disastrous. There is a deeply ingrained correlation in the Sinhala mind (but not in the Tamil mind) between size and prosperity. The bigger the state, the more prosperous the nation. No one pauses to ask if this is true. We do have bigger neighbors at whom we can look to test the truth of this belief. India is 60 times bigger than Sri Lanka but is very considerably poorer. Pakistan is 12 times bigger than Sri Lanka but is poorer than Sri Lanka. On the other hand the Maldivian Republic is one-two-hundredth the size of Sri Lanka but is set to overtake Sri Lanka soon in per capita income. A quick look across the Bay of Bengal brings us to the Republic of Singapore which is one-hundredth the size of Sri Lanka but is 40 times richer. If we look to our south-east across the Indian Ocean we find The Seychelles which is one hundred and fifty times smaller than Sri Lanka but is 10 times richer. The unquestioned correlation between size and prosperity is, perhaps, the best example of the absurdities that possess the mind of the Sinhala nation. It is entirely devoid of a grain of truth but is believed as divinely ordained wisdom.

22. It is on ridiculous and egregious assumptions that we have ventured on war to seek our salvation. It is transparently clear that the very opposite of what we are now doing is what will give the Sinhala nation a modest hope of re-joining the modern world and beginning the long-delayed work of delivering to the Sinhala nation even a modicum of prosperity and progress. ■