

SRI LANKA - AN ONGOING TRAGEDY

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I visited Sri Lanka for the very first time last November, on an evaluation project for OXFAM. It was an exciting as well as saddening experience. Exciting because it is a vibrant and beautiful country, with much in common with India, and lots of warm, friendly and intelligent people. Saddening because it is in the throes of a conflict which takes a toll of thousands every year, with no signs of a solution. Teenagers are under arms on both sides, and there are reports of even younger children being recruited in the North. The roads of Colombo are prepared with road-blocks and army personnel. There are vested interests which profit from the war, not least of them the arms trade. The situation is volatile and can change drastically within short periods of time. A certain level of tension and violence are taken for granted among the people, and I got the distinct impression of an air of resignation. However, it is also true that ordinary citizens are beginning to take initiatives for peace. Organisations such as the National Peace Council and the National Alliance for Peace have begun work at grassroots level to bridge ethnic boundaries and create an atmosphere for serious negotiations. Peace initiatives being taken by teachers and students, theologians, war veterans, women's groups and Community Based Organizations humanitarian organisations and organisations of scholars.

Sri Lanka is in the grip of a political emergency which has taken on a severe military aspect. It involves the history and functioning of democratic institutions, resources and rights. The dynamics of conflict in various parts of the country are inter-related, although the contexts are different. It seems to have settled into a cycle of escalation. It also contains a process of 'normalisation' which operates on both sides, though in different ways.

These are matters we need to keep in mind while considering what role humanitarian organisations may play. How do we characterise the conflict. Is it a communal conflict of the kind with which Indians are familiar? Is it a civil war linked to geo-political factors as in Afghanistan? Why have the fears and grievances of communities

become crystallised around ethnic boundaries? These matters cannot be answered in simplistic terms. There is undoubtedly a crisis of political institutions. It is not a resource war, nor is Sri Lanka a collapsed state. It is unique in terms of the continuing functioning of the state, and the (relative) survival of democracy. Thus far, people on both sides of the military divide benefit in some measure from the state's existence. Nevertheless, as the legitimate sphere for the resolution of internally generated conflict, the Sri Lankan state has failed to maintain its credibility among different sections of the population. There is a great deal to be learned from the overall South Asian context, its colonial legacy of governance, its history of communal conflict and its experience of territorial partition along ethnic lines. Questions relating to provincial autonomy, affirmative action, language policy, the administration of the law and the politics of symbols also have direct bearing.

Whence the inertia that has normalised brutality in Sri Lanka? There is evidence that certain economic, social and psychological elements are feeding into a war economy and constituency. This poses the question of a peace constituency. Ideally speaking, peace implies a stable democratic system in which conflicts don't reach crisis proportions in an immediate sense. Sri Lankans desperately need a defusion of the military conflict, demobilisation of armed bodies and the demilitarization of the mind. Making dichotomies between 'guilty warmongers' and 'innocent civilians' is a dubious procedure for a conflict wherein historical memory, ideology and hyperbole play such a large role in ethnic bitterness. Only the articulation of a peace constituency working consistently in public life can achieve peace in a basic sense. Sri Lanka's crisis is a mirror for all of us. As I remarked to the small audience at the Indian Cultural Centre after a viewing of the award-winning documentary film on non-violence, "A Season Outside", we Indians have a legacy of communal bitterness that has festered for decades. The partition of territories is always preceded by a partition of the mind, and no Indian could wish partition on any neighbour. There is no alternative to non-violence in such situations. ■

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