
THE ETHNIC DIMENSIONS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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The Ethnic Dimensions of Socio-Economic Development by Godfrey Gunatilleke, Marga Monograph No.10.

Objectivity on the ethnic issue is becoming increasingly rare. Dr. Godfrey Gunatilleke achieves just that in this concise yet comprehensive monograph on the socio-economic dimensions of the ethnic conflict. Extremists on both sides of the communal divide will no doubt be critical of his treatment. That again would be the acid test of objectivity. The author's approach has been one of attempting to understand the underlying factors and the political and economic developments that have brought the country to the impasse we have got into in the post independent period.

Objectivity is however not the only merit of this monograph. In a short space of 36 textual pages and 15 invaluable summary statistical tables, the author brings to bear his skills of lucid expression, historical insights, economic development experience and his in depth understanding of political development and social welfare policies. It is indeed an interdisciplinary exposition that could sober the current conflicting positions on the ethnic question.

Of special significance is the centrality he places on the demographic aspects of the ethnic conflict. The political responses are interpreted perceptively in terms of the demographic composition of the population. The author points out that fundamental to the understanding of the ethnic conflict is the demographic pattern both nationally and regionally. The fact that the Sinhalese constituted an overwhelming majority with around 70 per cent of the population resulted in the ethnic issue being "relegated to a secondary place in the political agenda of the parties representing the Sinhala majority." This is pointed out as the reason for the governments representing the Sinhala majority abrogating their undertakings to the Tamil parties on several occasions. In consequence the Tamil politicians saw in this attitude a "galling casualty and lack of compunction."

The regional concentration of Tamils and their overwhelming majority in the North, where 71 per cent of them lived, lead to a polarisation of ethnic prejudices and political mobilization on an ethnic basis. This was in contrast to the situation with respect to the Moors whose more dispersed demographic pattern resulted in their political participation with the Sinhala majority.

The consequence of this demographic distribution Gunatilleke argues was that "Democratic politics in the Tamil constituencies became increasingly irrelevant for the major Sinhala parties. This was inevitable as the Tamil parties consolidated their monopoly of

power in Tamil areas along ethnic divisions, thereby limiting the space for participation by the two parties controlled by the Sinhala majority."

Gunatilleke is however careful to point out that these demographic factors though fundamental to the way the conflict developed are not an adequate explanation of what actually happened. In his words "The demographic weights by themselves may not be adequate to explain the differences in the propensity for conflict." He then goes on to examine several policy aspects that generated the ethnic conflict.

The language policies, land alienation policies, educational quotas and the democratisation of economic opportunities that reversed initial advantages the Tamils had, all led to a perception of severe discrimination of the Tamil minority. This was particularly so with respect to the implementation of the Sinhala Only official language policy and the recruitment impacts of it and the standardisation and the quota system for university education. These policies "did have the effect of reducing their (Tamil's) share by about a third of the total admissions that they could have otherwise had in open competition." Gunatilleke goes on to point out that "these developments were perceived by the Tamil community and its youth in particular as ethnic discrimination in one of its worst forms."

The monograph has an extensive discussion of the welfare transformation of the country. Dr. Gunatilleke argues that "there are no serious grievances or perceptions of discrimination in regard to the core elements of the welfare programme." This he points out is a "positive attribute of the social welfare agenda." However, paradoxically the equitably distributed welfare package aggravated the conflict as it reversed the more favourable position the Tamils had attained in the colonial period.

In Gunatilleke's words: "The participation of the Sri Lankan community in both the welfare and the state-led development of industry and agriculture is not significantly different from that of the rest of the population. But within this framework of policies that were designed to achieve greater equity by correcting for prevailing imbalances in employment and education discriminated heavily against the Tamil community."

The large-scale violence against the Tamils on several occasions, it is argued, changed the situation radically. Dr. Gunatilleke concludes that "More than any discriminatory policies, the violence radically altered the conditions in which Tamils could live and take part in economic activity outside the North and East".

The contrasting experience of Malaysia discussed by the author briefly is illuminating and thought provoking. The private sector orientation and the robust growth of the Malaysian economy were in contrast to the state dominant economic policies since 1956 and inadequate economic opportunities generated by the economy. This state orientation in economic policies led to any inadequate economic opportunities being interpreted as discriminatory acts of the majority led governments. Hardships that may have been faced by all communities began to be perceived by the ethnic minority as ethnic discrimination. "A dynamic entrepreneurial Chinese community", Dr. Gunatilleke points out, "was able to accommodate the Bhumiputra policies which reserved the major part of the opportunities provided by the state to the indigenous Malays." The Chinese found ample space in private enterprise to ensure their economic well being and thereby eased possible conflicts. The quotations from the Soulbury Commission Report

are an interesting feature of the presentation. They show, in retrospect, the farsighted perspectives of the Commissioners. Regrettably the wise admonitions in the Report were ignored.

Although a short monograph, its comprehensiveness makes this brief review inadequate to portray its rich and varied content. The book is mandatory reading for all those who wish to view the ethnic issue in historical, political and economic perspectives. An understanding of the issue in the broad perspectives of the author could be a basis for building a more balanced approach to this controversial and emotionally charged issue.

It is fortunate that this monograph will be available in Sinhala and Tamil. These versions could have a greater impact than the English version that is reviewed here. ■

Dear Shahid, I am writing to you from your far-off country. Far even from us who live here. Where you no longer are. Everyone carries his address in his pocket so that at least his body will reach home.

Rumours break on their way to us in the city. But word still reaches us from border towns: Men are forced to stand barefoot in snow waters all night. The women are alone inside. Soldiers smash radios and televisions. With bare hands they tear our houses to pieces.

You must have heard Rizwan was killed. Rizwan: Guardian of the Gates of Paradise. Only eighteen years old. Yesterday at Hideout Cafe (everyone there asks about you), a doctor - who had just treated a sixteen-year-old boy released from an interrogation centre - said: "I want to ask the fortune-tellers: Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that the webs of his hands would be cut with a knife?"

This letter, Insh'Allah, will reach you for my brother goes south tomorrow where he shall post it. Here one can't even manage postage stamps. Today I went to the post office. Across the river. Bags and bags - hundreds of canvas bags - all undelivered mail. By chance I looked down and there on the floor I saw this letter addressed to you. So I am enclosing it. I hope it's from someone you are longing for news of.

Things here are as usual though we always talk about you. Will you come home soon? Waiting for you is like waiting for spring. We are waiting for the almond blossoms. And, if God wills, O! those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we went.

Agha Shahid Ali

A prose poem taken from *The Country Without a Post Office* by Agha Shahid Ali (WW Norton, £8.50). Ali was an award-winning Kashmiri poet praised by, amongst others, John Ashbery and Edward Said. He died last December.