

So to a final gathering of the many threads of this essay. Society in Sri Lanka is still pre-modern in its organization, with caste a significant factor. Universal franchise enjoyed since 1930 and the spread of modern knowledge and socialist ideologies have not reduced its pervasiveness; neither have other archaic forms such as the dependence on astrology being affected; they have displayed an unexpected degree of resilience.

A democratic politics in effect exists in tension with an anti-democratic form of social organization and anti-rational systems of knowledge.

Democratic politics also exist in a distorted form. This reduces democracy merely to the rule of the majority, leaving very little room for the tolerance of minorities or of dissent. It is this majoritarian democracy that has led to ethnic conflict, civil war and the pervasive presence of violence. It has also prevented the growth of any notion of a Sri Lankan nation within which minorities can be accommodated.

(courtesy, *The Hindu*, February 04, 1998)

SRI LANKA AT FIFTY: THE BIRTH OF A TRAGEDY

Jayadeva Uyangoda

Salman Rushdie's characters in the fictionalized account of India after independence, *Midnight's Children*, were born at the moment of India's independence midnight on August 15, 1947. My own *samsaric* encounter with the political independence of my country has been slightly different. I was not born at the time when the Union Jack was being lowered and the Lion's Flag hoisted in Colombo, on February 04, 1948. I was born two years later, in 1950. Yet, in a political- and historical sense, my own biography of past forty eight years has been closely intertwined with the fifty-year biography of post-colonial Sri Lanka. I grew up in the early fifties in the relative peace of an isolated Sinhalese village. As a nine year old, I learnt about the assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike, and political assassinations were to constitute a major facet of my country's politics since I reached the age of thirty eight. As an eight year-old child, in 1958, I learnt about differences between Sinhalese and Tamil communities; then, of course, even the everyday events of my entire adult life were to be governed by Sinhala-Tamil conflictual politics. I came of age in the radical sixties while being fed and educated by one of the best welfare states in the developing world. The welfare state, which also stood as an obstacle to significant economic growth potential, produced from among its own children a generation of bewildered idealists. Being one among them, I ran away from home, became a modern anarchist, tried my hand at revolution and along with my generation paid a heavy price for that misadventure. Then in the twilight of my youth, in the 1980s, I witnessed how my country all of a sudden began to lose all its idealism and hope while aggression, hostility, ethnic self-righteousness, brutality and violence were welcomed with fervor by all those who played a part in shaping Sri Lanka's political future. Presently, I watch, with no pleasure at all, how Sri Lanka is running deeper and deeper in to the crisis which has been there for many decades. In despair, I read poetry of despair. As I recently read in a poem by Pakistan's Kishwar Naheed, "I and my country were born together - We lost our sight in childhood."

The story of Sri Lanka's fifty years of independence is also the story of how a new nation-state lost its sight as well as innocence in

childhood and went awry in adulthood. This birth of an unfolding tragedy could initially be sighted by only a few. In 1956, when the Sinhalese was made the official language, Colvin R. de Silva, a Marxist parliamentarian at that time, summed it up pithily when he said: "Two languages - one country; one language: two countries." Then in the sixties, B.H. Farmer, a British geographer titled his study of Sri Lankan politics after independence, *Ceylon: A Divided Nation*.

Myths

Sri Lanka's independence of 1948 was unique in ex-colonial South Asia; it was not achieved after a long and arduous nationalist struggle as in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. Rather, Sri Lanka's independence was 'granted' by the British, soon after decision was made to part with the 'Jewel of the Crown', British India. Sri Lanka's nationalist leaders were constitutional lobbyists at their best; practicing a highly legalistic form of nationalist agitation, they were more inclined towards constitutional reform negotiations to obtain the status of a responsible government than extra-institutional mobilization directed towards achieving swaraj. Then, of course, the post-war Labour government had decided to de-colonize the empire by leaving the South Asian sub-continent. By a stroke of fate, Sri Lanka became a direct beneficiary of the epoch-making independence struggle of the people across the Palk Straits. It was not an accident then, that February 4, 1948 fell less than a year after August 14 and 15 of 1947, the founding dates of Pakistan and India.

Sri Lanka's so-called non-violent path to independence in 1948 has given rise to a mythology, popularized mostly by secondary school text-book writers. Every school child is taught that the Sri Lankan people obtained independence without shedding a single drop of blood. In a way, the British colonial rulers did not cause much shedding of a blood, as they did in India or Africa, during their one and half a century-stay in Sri Lanka. The annexation of the island's coastal areas from the Dutch in 1796 was more a result of a change

in the military balance in Europe than a war of conquest. Similarly, the capture of the Kandyan kingdom in 1815 was made relatively easy because of the confluence of interests between the renegade Kandyan aristocracy and the British administrators in Colombo. Soon after the conquest of Kandy, there were two rebellions against the British rule, one in 1818 and the other in 1848. In terms of their social origins, the two rebellions came from two different social strata; the first was largely a display of resistance by the disillusioned Kandyan aristocracy while the participants in the second were the impoverished Kandyan peasantry. Both rebellions were suppressed in blood. However, between 1815 and 1915 the colony remained relatively peaceful. It was also the period during which the colonial plantation economy took firm root, a centralized administrative system enveloped the entire island and a local bourgeoisie and the middle classes emerged in the new social structure. During the Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915 violence did occur, yet Sri Lanka did not experience a massacre that was equivalent in severity and magnitude to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. This led to another colonial and academic myth about Sri Lanka under the British - a 'model colony.'

The nationalist historiography, however, has its own reading of Sri Lanka's independent struggle, which is also taught to every school child. As this particular historical analysis posits, after the Sinhalese heroism in battle against the colonial rule was suppressed twice in the early and mid nineteenth century, a religio-cultural renaissance began in the second half of the same century centered on Buddhist revivalism. It defied and challenged both European culture and Christianity. Contemporary Sinhalese nationalist historians call this revivalism a search for a truly national identity by a subjugated nation which was seeking its own cultural and spiritual emancipation.

National Disunity

Quite interestingly, when political agitation for constitutional reforms earnestly began in the early twentieth century, the mass potential of the Sinhalese cultural revivalist movement had already elapsed. Space for public activity had shifted from religion and culture to constitutional reforms and the civic leadership from middle class vernacular intelligentsia to patrician notables. Members of a class of land-owning and professional gentry, these notables were the top-layer of native Sri Lankan society. The 'nationalist' leaders, both Sinhala and Tamil, formed the Ceylon National Congress in 1919 as a joint front to agitate for reforms, but the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic rivalry soon took over the Congress agenda and competitive ethnic politics began to characterize the entire nationalist reform movement in the decades to follow. Communalist political agendas aimed at securing a greater share of power for the Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders in the colonial legislature were so rigid that the Donoughmore Commission which came to Ceylon in 1929 to report on Constitutional reforms described the Sri Lankan variety of communalism as 'a canker on the body politic eating deeper and deeper into the vital energies of the people.'

Why is it that Sri Lanka did not produce a mass nationalist struggle for complete independence from the British? In Sri Lanka, answers to this question are always formulated contrasting Sri Lanka's nationalist politics with the Indian experience. In India, as this explanation goes, the Indian National Congress mobilized the masses for complete independence and the nationalist movement of the elite linked itself with the struggle of the peasant and working class masses through the medium of Gandhian politics of defiance and resistance. Another contrast with India, often made by Sri Lankan Marxists, is that while India under colonial capitalism had produced a relatively mature 'national bourgeoisie' with a capacity to resist the colonial power, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie was weak, underdeveloped and as a class totally dependent on the colonial economy and culture. A remark often made by observers from the sub-continent who visit Colombo may perhaps add another perspective to this argument: the Sri Lankan elite, even today, constitutes the most British of the South Asian elite.

With retrospective historical insights, one may argue today that the absence of a militant anti-colonial movement in Sri Lanka in the immediate pre-independence decades was not necessarily a negative feature. After the 1920s, the elite politics was conducted exclusively on communalist terms. The introduction of universal adult franchise in 1931 further added to ethnicization of elite political practices, because in the absence of an advanced civil society ethnic fears and prejudices, rather than party programmes, appeared to be more attractive to professional politicians. As the research of such scholars as Jane Russell, Michael Roberts and Nira Wickremasinghe demonstrate, the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic bifurcation of political interests has been so intense during this period that Sinhala and Tamil political leaders pursued no other mode of mobilization than making appeals to the most sectarian of racist impulses they themselves had constructed. In case Sinhala and Tamil patrician elites succeeded in mobilizing the masses as well on such emotive platforms of ethnic enmity, the independence of 1948 would have easily been preceded by a blood bath as was the case in India and Pakistan in 1947. For this failure at least, history may perhaps forgive the weak, dependent and thoroughly conservative colonial bourgeoisie of Sri Lanka and its political leaders!

Meanwhile, there was also a minor stream of swarajists associated with the Left and radical nationalism. The Left program was for an anti-imperialist struggle, combined with social revolution. Most fascinating, however, were the radical Sinhala nationalists who were largely inspired by the Indian nationalist struggle, particularly by its militant Bengali version. Mahatma Gandhi and Nethaji Chandra Bose were their role models. Led by a group of Left-oriented intellectual monks, these radical nationalists took the unusually courageous step of making a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) for Sri Lanka in 1946, perhaps the last radically progressive action associated with Sri Lanka's Buddhist nationalists.

Sri Lankan Exceptionalism

The absence of ethnic violence at the moment of independence constituted what one may call the Sri Lankan

exceptionalism in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, there was no Mahatma Gandhi to be gunned down; a two-nation theory of state formation had not yet evolved. Nor was there a modern philosopher-statesman to create political poetry out of the midnight symbolism of destiny and freedom. Independence in February 1948 was mainly an official exercise of, to use historian Kingsley de Silva's phrase, 'transfer of power.' And power was transferred to a stratum of city-dwelling gentry who had been fairly well-schooled in the politics of sectarian competition, yet possessed only a poor vision for their own role in effecting a meaningful political change in a plural society.

The first ten years of independence were crucial to the shaping of the future path of Sri Lanka, because that was the period in which the young independent country began to show symptoms of losing sight of the future. The ideology of counter-pluralism so ardently built up during the previous two decades by the Ceylon National Congress headed by D. S. Senanayake and the Sinhala Maha Sabha of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike guided the behaviour of the new state soon after power was transferred. The fear of Indians swamping the island, a theme that gave much rhetorical energy to Congress and Sabha politicians in the pre-independence years, was translated into legislative practice by the new, independent parliament with the citizenship law of 1948. While this legislation was meant to exclude from citizenship nearly half a million of Tamil plantation workers, a subsequent election law enacted in 1949 deprived them of franchise rights as well. This Sinhala majoritarian assertion in the wake of independence immediately gave rise to a Tamil minoritarian assertion around the demand for a federal state on the assumption that Tamil fears of eventual Sinhalese domination of state power-expressed earlier had been proved. Thus, within two years of independence, Sri Lanka's quest for nation-building led itself on two tracks — a Sinhala track and a Tamil track — which were never to meet throughout the fifty years that followed.

Enemy Within

It is these two competing visions of a modern Sri Lankan state, totally grounded on separate and unmediated ethnic interests, that have informed the island's peculiar path of de-colonization. And indeed, if both the Sinhalese and Tamil societies failed to give rise to an anti-colonial mass struggle in the pre-independence period, within five to six years of independence they were quick to discover the enemy within the territorial borders of the island so that the unspent political energies could now be marshalled for what may be termed as post-colonial nationalism. As the Sri Lankan experience clearly demonstrated, post-colonial nationalism was also a peculiar process of de-colonization in which gaining access to, and the control of, state power was seen as the prime mechanism for correcting injustices suffered by the majority Sinhalese-Buddhist community during the pre-independence colonial period.

De-colonization in ex-colonial societies has always been a nationalist endeavor. Anti-colonial nationalisms have been generally constructed with the notions of establishing political sovereignty for communities who had come to see themselves through the modern political category of the nation. But, the combination of de-coloni-

zation and post-colonial nationalisms in Sri Lanka have had another feature which began to crystalize itself in the early 1950s. We may call it the displacement of the enemy. The Sinhala Buddhist nationalists viewed the minority Tamils and Christians as beneficiaries of the British colonial rule and therefore their political project enunciated the position that de-colonization would mean political and cultural empowerment of the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority. In this framework, the post-independence empowerment of the Sinhala-Buddhist society was a post-colonial negotiation with the colonial past. Meanwhile, the de-colonization project of Tamil nationalism had a different approach to the issue of post-independent empowerment. It was grounded on the belief that before the colonial advent, Tamils in the North-East had been a separate sovereign entity and that any post-independence political arrangement, to be meaningful to Tamils, would ensure accommodation of that sovereignty in the form of regional autonomy. And the Tamil nationalists began to use the formulation 'Sinhalese imperialism' as early as the 1950s, pointing to their belief that independence of 1948 benefited only the Sinhalese.

Once the enemy was discovered within, it was relatively easy for both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist projects to assume a somewhat mass character within just ten years of Sri Lanka's independence. With this qualitative transition, the leadership of two nationalist mobilizations was passed into new actors. The social composition of new forces of post-colonial Sinhala nationalism was totally different from the Anglicized Sinhala elite that negotiated the transfer of power from the British. The leadership of the new Sinhala nationalist forces emerged from among the vernacular intelligentsia of the urban as well as semi-rural intermediate classes, the latter being the social core of the new mobilization. Tamil nationalism too underwent a significant transition. While a new party called the Federal Party was formed in 1952, the notion of national-self determination was gradually introduced to the Tamil nationalist discourse. The new forces also shifted their focus away from business and professional Tamil elites in Colombo to middle class social groups in the Tamil districts of the North and East. Making Sinhala the official language of 1956 and ethnic riots of 1958 — the two moments that decisively defined the subsequent Sinhala-Tamil relations as well as the majoritarian nature of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state — were events the historical meaning of which could be discerned only in the context of the social transition of post-colonial Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms.

Resistance to Reforms

Because the question of state power became so crucial and central to Sinhala and Tamil nationalist goals in the post-independence phase, political accommodation between the two became excruciatingly painful and difficult. The fate of Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1958, the Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1966, the District Development Councils scheme of 1982 and the Provincial Councils system of 1987 demonstrate, in varying degrees, what one may call the reform-resistant character of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. It is perhaps a political irony that only post-colonial Tamil nationalism, precisely because it was a nationalism of an ethnic minority, could present a

state-reform perspective for a pluralistic polity. The Tamil federalist demand, if we detach it from its avowedly ethnic overtones, can be seen as the most important political intervention in making the post-colonial Sri Lankan state modern, more democratic and pluralistic. But, the federalist demand touched the very essence of the question of the state and it could only further strengthen the unitarist impulses of Sinhala nationalist politics. Given the fact that post-colonial Sri Lanka's ruling class has been an ethnic Sinhalese ruling class, the task of reforming the state still remains an incomplete project. The whole experience of the 1972 and 1978 constitutions was one of institution-wrecking and not institution-building — in essence, counter-reformist. The puzzle of ethnicized democracy in Sri Lanka is that even a purely legislative attempt towards a pluralistic reform measure would either require and generate generalized political violence as witnessed in 1987-88. Or, if violence is not resorted to by a reform-minded regime, as is the case today in Sri Lanka, the reform process will have to go through a long journey and might even run the risk of ending in futility.

Looking back at the past fifty years through the prism of Sri Lanka's crisis today, one may realize with amazement that political institu-

tion-building, in order to facilitate the management of ethnic relations, has not entered the thinking of the ruling elites for almost forty years. Almost all legislative and constitutional attempts made during those four decades in the sphere of ethnic relations by all regimes have resulted in destroying the space for pluralistic institution-building. The blame should be shared by both Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders whose short-term visions, however just they may have appeared at one time or another for their own ethnic communities, could not create or inspire a collective and sustainable long-term vision for Sri Lanka. The first meaningful framework of institution-building was introduced in 1987 with the establishment of provincial councils. The irony there was that even that measure was forced on the Jayewardene regime by the Indian state amidst much resistance from the majority of political forces.

Why this hard-headed political conservatism in Sri Lanka? Why such a monumental blindness to the future? Is it because Sri Lanka lost her sight in childhood? In its blindness to future, the Sri Lankan state has grown up during the past fifty years in a self-made political culture of resistance to reform.

LOOKING AHEAD WITH ANXIETY

Eqbal Ahmad

It was as though God had been angry with us. The much awaited -golden jubilee turned to ashes in 1997. Even by Pakistani standards this was a year of sustained losses from which country may take decades to recover. 1998 is therefore a year to anticipate anxiously.

Despite the instability and periodic crises, the frequent changes in government, the rampant corruption, the social and political violence, continuous warfare in Karachi, the proliferation of drugs and guns, we made significant gains in the preceding decade. The following come to mind: One, as parliamentary government was restored, the polity had developed a two-party system, a condition which normally contributes to the making of stable democracy. Two, given some freedom, a lively press had emerged not only, significantly, in English but also in Urdu. During the decade constant progress was made with new dailies, monthlies and weeklies appearing to represent different outlooks and orientations so that few third world countries could match the variety, independence and engagement of Pakistan's press. Three, civil society had been enlivened by concerned citizens and non-governmental organizations addressing social and economic development and social change, the rights of minorities, and the welfare of the neglected majority. Four, together the press and citizen-activists had succeeded in putting out an agenda for reform - of state and society, land and labor, health and education. Corruption was exposed and

confronted; accountability was demanded as never before. Five, signs of hope for Pakistan's judiciary appeared: that it would achieve a degree of genuine autonomy and also exercise the powers of judicial review, thereby contributing towards the separation of powers which is essential to a functioning democracy. Six, a relationship marked by healthy, dialectical patterns of antagonism and collaboration, dissent and assent had begun to grow between state and civil society, another *sine qua non* of democratic and civic political order. Seven, partly as a consequence of these developments there has been a certain diminishment in Pakistan's crisis of integration. No significant separatist movement emerged to question the legitimacy of Pakistani statehood. While religious sectarianism and violence did raise their ugly heads, no conflicts erupted along ethnic or linguistic divides. Even the violent, protracted confrontation between the MQM and the state did not acquire a Mohajir-Sindhi aspect.

At the start of 1998, all these gains appear to be in jeopardy. In the aftermath of the February elections, the discovery of the Swiss accounts, and consequent demoralization of the family-centered Peoples Party, Pakistan has reverted effectively to becoming a one party, one province, one-man polity. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's decision to hold the local bodies as -partyless elections is but one unfortunate reflection of this fact. The nomination, and election as President by an overwhelming vote, of a man lacking in national stature or appeal, is another. In the coming year or two a meaningful