

HISTORIOGRAPHIES IN CONFLICT

The debate on the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict and proposals for its resolution have taken a new momentum as a result of the proposed 'devolution package' introduced by the PA Government. In this context, the publication of Prof. Leslie Gunawardena's *Historiography in a Time of Ethnic Conflict* (1995) by the Social Scientists' Association (SSA) is timely and welcome.

During the last decade or so, both Gunawardena and the SSA have contributed immensely to our understanding of the historical roots of the ethnic conflict, mythical and real, and have revealed the extent to which the present day writers have tended to reconstruct the history in terms of their ethnic perceptions.

The first landmark in these efforts was the *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka* published in 1984 by the SSA. A major contribution to this monograph came from Gunawardena titled 'The People of the Lion: Sinhala Consciousness in History and Historiography' in which he argued very convincingly that the formation of the Sinhala ethnicity was a long term process and it took the form of

dynasty > land > people.

Hence Gunawardena argued that it is irrational to claim that Sinhala consciousness or 'nationalism' existed from the beginning of our history in the same manner that it exists today. He pointed out that there is a strong element of racism in the contemporary Sinhala consciousness that perhaps had not existed in ancient times. What became categorically challenged as a result of this thesis was the myth that Sri Lanka has exclusively been a Sinhala country from the beginning of its history.

Gunawardena's recent publication, subtitled 'Construction of the Past in Contemporary Sri Lanka', has gone further and has investigated in detail the futility of efforts both by Sinhala and Tamil scholars to reconstruct the history in terms of their contemporary ethnic perceptions. The interpretations and reinterpretations of Vallipurum inscriptions are such examples which he has investigated. Vallipurum inscription found in Jaffna peninsula, probably belonging to the first century a.d., is a short verse written in Brahmi script. It says very little:

During the reign of King Vahaba, Isigiraya was governing Nakadiva. And Piyaguka Tisa built a vihara at Badakara-atana.

Brahmi script in which the inscription was written was common in many parts of South and Southeast Asia during this period and does not say anything about Sinhala or Tamil domination in Jaffna. The language used in the inscription can at best be called proto-Sinhala and the influence of both Sanskrit and Dravidian might be found in its formation. Buddhism was the most common elite religion found in South India and Sri Lanka during this time and therefore the building of a *vihara* by Piyaguka Tisa at Badakara-atana does not say anything about a Sinhala Buddhist tradition in Jaffna of that period. According to Gunawardena, the formation of a Sinhala ethnicity was very much a later development.

Gunawardena also shows that Prof. A. Veluppillai's effort to interpret isigiraya as the first rule of a Tamil Eelam is tenuous and flimsy. "The methodology adopted in his [Veluppillai's] study clearly demonstrates the vitiating impact that the contemporary ethnic conflict has brought to bear on research involving even the most ancient times," notes Gunawardena. Veluppillai has assumed without much basis that 'Isi' was the ancient form or word for Eelam and therefore 'Isigiraya' means the King of Eelam.

The significance of Gunawardena's present study rests not only in his refutation of ethnonationalist interpretations of our ancient history, but also in his attempt to present a theoretical framework within which the historical formation of ethnicities could properly be understood. This aspect of his study is a great progress compared to his earlier study published in 1984. Because, his earlier study could have given the mistaken impression that ethnicity and ethnicism are modern notions without much history into the ancient past. As he has admitted in the present study 'the term ethnos goes far back in history to the time of Herodotos and Aristotle.'

To be sure, *Manavas* or Homo Sapiens, did not emerge at the beginning of their formation as separated into various ethnicities. The most ancient human remains are found in present day Ethiopia dating back to more than three million years and it is ridiculous to argue about their ethnic identity. In the Sri Lankan context, it is equally futile to argue about the ethnicity of the 'Balangoda Man', the most ancient human remains that we have found in this country.

Because, at that time ethnic formations among human beings who inhabited this country had not yet started. Nevertheless, the ethnic formations can be considered primarily of pre-modern origin. This was the case in Sri Lanka as in many other countries. Giving a date to this formation is a difficult task as Gunawardena has confronted in his historical research.

There seems to have been two main processes in the formation of ethnicities: one sociological and the other political. In many cases the sociological process preceded the political process but overlapped eventually under the latter's hegemony. The sociological process brought different tribal and linguistic groups together through 'war', marriage and simply living in geographical proximity. This is in a sense what Gunawardena terms as the 'primary' phase or form. But this primary phase did not bring ethnicities into the present formation.

The early inscriptions in this country shows the existence of many tribal or proto-ethnic groups, apart from the 'aboriginal' inhabitants. But any reference to Sinhala as a tribal group or an ethnic group is conspicuously absent. Perhaps, the elite groups who migrated from North India dominated the process with their linguistic and religious traditions imposing on others. Pali was the *lingua franca* of the elite until the end of the first millennium.

Gunawardena's central argument is that it was the political process or more particularly the state formation which brought the Sinhala ethnicity into being. This is a significant thesis in any study on ethnic formation. It was this political process which glued the ethnicity which it created along linguistic and religious lines. The state formation in Sri Lanka was primarily a process governed by economics as in many other countries. Given the ecological conditions, a state was needed primarily to control and distribute water resources. After its creation, however, it sought its legitimacy through religious and ethnic lines. Most of the states or more correctly state-lets which emerged in the early history of our country were of 'theocratic' nature than of ethnic ones. Religious rituals and economic activities, both performed under the patronage of the state, had a very close relationship. This relationship has been analyzed in detail by the same author, Gunawardena, in his *Robe and the Plough* (19..), which was his doctoral thesis.

If we were to take the Dutugemunu story in its essence, the driving ideological force behind the conquest was not ethnicity but religion. But there is reason to believe that towards the end of the first millennium, there was an effort to forge an ethnic identity based on linguistic and other lines. This was the case in Sri Lanka as well as in South India. This effort came from the state and elite groups surrounding it. The result was the formation of ethnic states. King Kassapa V argued in *Dhampiya Atuva Getapadaya* that

How do (we) obtain (the term) in the *helu* language? That is from the fact the island people are *helu*. How does (the word) Helese (*helaha*) come about? King Sinhabahu having killed a

lion was named Sinhala... Since prince was his son, he (too) was named Sihala. The others since they were his (Vijaya's) retinue (*pirivara*) (they too) came to be called Sihala.

The above was an effort to link the language, the people and the dynasty together. The state during this time, however, could not be understood in the present day meaning. The ancient states controlled not territories but communities. A well defined territory was missing in the ancient state system even in a small island like Sri Lanka. There were areas and communities which did not come under the control of the state. During this period, ethnicities were not exclusive entities. They were loose and open ended entities with enormous room to move from one to the other. They were in the process of formation. Nevertheless, ethnicity and even ethnicism, in my opinion, were mainly the products of this pre-modern period.

The above phase, Gunawardena has termed 'archaic'. But why archaic? It is a term very much similar to the term he used to identify the first phase or form, 'primary'. While preoccupying himself for a long polemic against Prof. K. N. O. Dharmadasa on the subject of Sinhala ethnic formation, Gunawardena has also failed to give us a clear picture or analysis of the different phases of ethnic development and the differences between them. He termed the contemporary (colonial and post-colonial) phase of ethnic formation as 'mature'. Why mature? In what sense is it 'mature' to the primary or archaic form? There are obvious differences between the modern phase of ethnicism in this country and the pre-modern phase. But the contemporary phenomenon of ethnicism is nothing but the reactivation of archaic forms of ethnicism through the print media, mass mobilizations and perceived conceptions of exclusive identities.

The most ideal development in the period should have been the nation and political nationalism and not ethnicity and ethnicism. However, history has not taken a linear progression from ethnicity to nation especially in multi-ethnic and belated developing countries such as Sri Lanka. Therefore, there has been a tremendous overlap between ethnicity and nation giving rise to the most contradictory notions such as 'Sinhala nationalism' and 'Tamil nationalism'.

To conclude, nationalism cannot be Sinhala or Tamil. Sinhalem or Tamilism cannot be nationalism but ethnicism. The term '*Jathi*' in our ancient vocabulary meant what Herodotos or Aristotle meant as 'ethnos'. It meant 'groups of people with common attributes'. These common attributes varied from time to time. But the pre-modern states used them heavily to their legitimacy and cohesiveness. The modern states are supposed to derive their legitimacy and cohesiveness from other and more democratic sources. When states seek ethnic, linguistic or religious sources for their legitimacy and power, they naturally create spiral reactions from 'other ethnicities' in multi-ethnic countries like Sri Lanka. This is what has happened in Sri Lanka and it is within this context that history has become distorted according to conflicting ethnic perceptions. ■

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