

PACKAGE AND THE DEBATE: CARROT TO THE SOUTH AND STICK TO THE NORTHEAST

Rev. Dr S. J. Emmanuel

For over a decade, Sri Lanka is caught up in an ethnic war of increasing death and destruction in the North and East. And of late the political package to end the ethnic conflict has been evoking heated discussions among various groups and leaders. Though both the war and the debate are proclaimed to be for peace and unity of the country, in reality they are being conducted on two different fronts—the debate within the Southern constituency seeking support from the people and the War in the Northeast alienating the Tamils. Thus effectively the debate and the war tend to scuttle one another making peace and unity more evasive than ever before.

PART 1 : THE SOUTHERN DEBATE TOWARDS A NORTHEAST SOLUTION

Extremes in the Debate

The package of political proposals for a peaceful solution of the ethnic crisis and thereby seeking the restoration of peace and unity in the country marks a turning point in the political history of this country. Understandably it is receiving a great deal of attention from various sections of the population and accordingly evoking diverse reactions. On the one side, there appears an euphoria, spontaneous applause and even a blind support from those who hope that the package, if implemented, will avoid injustices and discriminations against the minorities and usher in an era of peace and unity in the country. On the other side, there is a strong and desperate opposition, especially from the Buddhist hierarchy, who see the proposals as paving the way for a division of the country in favour of the Tamil, or more particularly the LTTE demand for a separate Ealam.

Majority Open for Options

Between these two extremist groups are the majority, who apparently prompted by the wisdom of past experiences and the de facto deteriorating situation in the country, keep their fingers crossed about the outcome of these proposals. Their experience of the past with promises of political parties in power and with pacts and agreements that were never implemented deter them from any euphoria or giving unconditional support to the proposals. The fund of unprecedented good will

and trust generated in them by the new President keep them still open for options and changes in the approach and opposing any good attempt towards a solution of the national crisis.

Proposals as Proposals: A Positive and Courageous Step

There is no doubt that the President has demonstrated much courage and political vision, far superior to all her predecessors, in coming out with a set of proposals for such a radical change in the constitution so as to move towards a stable solution for the ethnic problem. In comparison with all the broken pacts signed between earlier leaders, and in comparison with the decentralization of power envisaged during the UNP regime, this package offers a horizontal sharing of power between the centre and the peripheries for a reasonable autonomy. This autonomy, going by the experience of many countries, will help resolve a number of regional problems as well as give a broader development of the whole country with the active and responsible participation of the grassroots talents.

The opponents to the package, mostly those politicians and bureaucrats used to centralized power and privilege, are reluctant to share power with the peripheries and lose their central importance and power. Although such power sharing is going on in other countries, the present supporters and beneficiaries of the unitary state nation as well as the corrupt practices which have been going on for a long time within the centralized bureaucracy will hinder a genuine power sharing.

Despite the slender majority in Parliament and strong opposition from the Buddhist hierarchy as well as power-hungry politicians and bureaucrats at the centre, she has shown sincerity of purpose and a courageous will in presenting to the country for the first time a set of proposals to solve radically the one problem that has consumed so much precious life and property of this country. She deserves not merely verbal applause but active support of all people of goodwill and institutions to carry these proposals through the different and difficult stages of its long passage.

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Debate Exclusively on the Substance and Confined to the South only

Although it is encouraging that a section of the southern constituency has come out in support of the proposals as a means to end the conflict and restore peace and unity without a division of the country into two conflicting blocks, yet it is disappointing to see that the whole debate and discussion is taking place only in the South, and that too mostly in Colombo, and the discussions are centred almost entirely around the substance or content of the package, (i.e. as to how much power, land, resources etc. should be given by the centre to the regions, especially the Northeast, and how much to be retained at the centre.) and not at all about the escalating war, nor about the viability or implementability of such proposals, nor about the undemocratic exclusion of the Northeast from the debate. The general attitude appears to be, let the paid soldiers from the poor peasantry fight the war at the cost of their lives and bring us victory over the LTTE and we will go on with our dinner-debates and our decisions will be imposed on the Northeast.!

The escalation of war towards a permanent stationing of troops and military bases in the Northeast, the absence of the people of the Northeast in the debate and the overlooking or silence about the viability of such proposals in the context of war-these are omissions too glaring for any sensible person. The debates are, at their best, a concerted effort of many at a political education of the South for a devolution of power, possibly preparing the way for the future realities to come.

Participants and Reasons for Support or Opposition

Among those taking part in this southern debate are people of various interests and institutions. There are the politicians from the various political parties-including some Tamil political groups-expressing support or opposition, partly motivated by their specific ideology and partly by political opportunism. Then there are the intellectuals and professionals, who have come out openly and voluntarily, individually and collectively, with their knowledge and expertise to help their motherland in crisis. The non-governmental organizations too stimulate debate and discussion on one point or other depending on their own interest and ideology. And finally the influential Buddhist and Christian hierarchies according to the self-understanding of their role in this country as well as according to the self-understanding of their role in this country as well as according to their vision of unity and peace for the country.

There have been introductions of new constitutions and changes therein in the past, but the present debate appears to be participated well by all sections of the southern constituency.

Among the supporters of the package, there are the few who understand devolution positively as restructuring government to suit the multi-ethnicity of the country and preserving

a unity of the country without further loss of lives through a senseless war. The proposal to make Sri Lanka into a Union of Regions is a wise move to get away from the unitary nation-state without endangering the unity of the country and the people. It is far better to acknowledge the plural character of the population and design a realistic unity out of the multi-ethnicity than to cling on to an unbuilt unitary-state as left behind by the colonial British and suffer the loss of so many lives.

The eloquence of the elite and of the power-seeking politician to defend and preserve the unity, integrity and sovereignty of the nation, through immense loss of lives, not of their own sons and daughters, but of the poor peasants of this country, must be pointed out and condemned as a hypocritical patriotism.

Among the opponents to this package are the vociferous Sinhala chauvinists and the Buddhist hierarchy who speak the language of the Landlord imagining the Tamils and Muslims to be mere tenants in this land. There are also other opponents, those who have tasted for too long too much of centralized power, privilege and wealth at the center. They are unwilling to devolve power and give up their posh residences and pajeros to those elected to govern the peripheries.

It is unfortunate that the majority of the backbenchers of parliament appear not to have the ability to present the package in a positive light. They are used to vote-seeking approaches. They resort to an anti-approach saying that the proposals are meant merely to wipe out the LTTE and their Ealam ideology. It is regrettable that their support to the President is so fragile and non-constructive for building peace and unity in the country.

Debate with the Tamils of the South

Understandably for the majority of Tamils living outside the Northeast, the devolution package as a package aimed at rectifying injustices and discriminations is bound to be attractive and may evoke a sigh of relief and hope for the future. Depending on the degree of rootedness they have in the South, their reactions can vary from a Colombo-centered cosmopolitanism (anti-regionalism) to a Northeast based regionalism or separatism. In this context it is misleading to assess the opinion or stance of a few Colombo-based elite intellectuals as that of all the Tamils in the South.

The government is informed by and talking mostly to Tamils who are born and bred in Colombo and who are well settled to enjoy a fair amount of success in business and comforts in living. They may be even in the envy of their Sinhala neighbours. In the event of a massive racial riot as was in 1956, 1958, 1977 and 1983 they have suffered. Many may have been unjustly discriminated in promotions or suspected as potential terrorists in their workplace. **They have a right to fight against the discriminations or injustices they suffer. But let them neither assume the leadership of a place or people with whom they have not identified themselves for a very long time nor devalue or betray the just cause of those still surviving the death and destruc-**

tion in the Northeast. The radically changed realities of the North and East call for their own leadership. Any meaningful debate must include that leadership.

On the other hand, the option of the Government to buy over some Colombo based able and elitist brains with mere Tamil names, (who have hardly any interests in the Northeast and have not been visited these areas, not even as tourists, for the last few decades), to present as a Tamil minister to the world outside, or to count his voice as that of the Tamils of Northeast is a shameful deception. They are not even recognized, leave alone elected, by the Tamils of the South. It has been a well known practice of former governments to buy over such persons to make up for Tamil representation at the center. But such tactics will not help in the future.

Still worse, those Tamils who got "elected" with the suspicious backing of the police and the IPKF in a staged-election, and not reckoned by a majority of the Tamils as any genuine voice of the Tamils is more a hindrance than a help in resolving the Tamil crisis.

Among the active supporters for the package are a variety of Tamil parties or groups too. Their support is not unconditional and the motives behind their support make interesting analysis. The TULF stands out as one party that has all along fought for a devolution of power through a federal structure or at least through a structure of regional autonomy within a unitary state-nation. It is understandable that as a party remaining faithful to the democratic structure and the present unitary system of Government, they have come out openly in favour of the package of proposals. They may well represent the aspirations of a good section of Tamils living outside the North and East. But two things are questionable. One, in view of their long absence in the war zone and loss of identity with those suffering and surviving there, how representative are they of the present aspirations of the Tamils still surviving in the North and East. Secondly in view of the two-pronged approach of the Government, debating proposals in the South and continuing war in the Northeast, how they justify the war and the exclusion of Northeast from the debate.

Possibilities of Opening Debate with the Northeast.

The reasons for the absence and participation of the Northeast in the debate are evident to those who are well informed of the ground there. While presenting the package to the country, both the President and her ministers have clearly stated their two pronged approach to the crisis, namely, that the proposals will be debated outside the North and East, that they will not be sent to the LTTE, that there was no intention of any dialogue with the LTTE, that the war in the North and East is to go on till the LTTE are exterminated, that the embargo and the restrictions on the life of the people will continue. Can such pronouncements, however much they may be intended for the Southern voter, ever create an atmosphere, leave alone a conducive situation, for a political consideration of proposals?

PART - II: ESCALATING WAR AND THROTTLING RESTRICTIONS

The Tragic Escalation of War towards an Irreversible Disaster

However good and promising these proposals and debates may be, how mesmerized or fascinated the majority may feel with the leadership, their promises and their proposals, one cannot afford to lose sight of the tragic consequences of what is really going on today in the country, in terms of an escalating war and its irreparable losses. It does not require much intelligence or common sense to see that **the present pattern of escalation of war and acquisition of hardware for stabilizing this war as a permanent state of the country are taking the country to an irreversible disaster.**

Both sides are going more and more for sophisticated weapons, While professors and politicians go on promising to their audience a war-victory and a peaceful solution in one and the same plate, and academics split hairs over the finer points of the professor's proposals, those engaged in war are escalating their efforts towards a permanent war in the Northeast. There is no sign of reducing the war or easing the conditions of life in the Northeast. With more and more loss of life and property, without any sign of victory or weariness, the blood-thirst and the hatred increases on both sides.

Pursuing the War scuttles Proposals

Therefore in spite of the courageous proposals for a radical change in the structure of the Government, in spite of the golden promises and enthusiastic debates and so on, **we are not at all moving in the direction of reconciliation, peace and unity of the country. With every death and destruction going on in the Northeastern theater of war, we are definitely and for all time moving away from reconciliation, peace and unity-those very ideals which the proposals proclaim to achieve.**

The Counter-Productive War

However much the Government and the people of the South may try to justify this war as a war for peace, as a war directed only against the LTTE and not against the people of the Northeast, as a war to liberate the people from the LTTE, as a war to weaken, if not wipe out, the LTTE, the naked truth is that it is against those living in the Northeast, enormous lives and property are lost every day and the gap between the South and the Northeast is widening beyond any proportions.

Besides the escalating war and its consequences for the people, there are also other measures of the Government directed to isolating the Northeast and punishing them with an inhuman embargo on the essentials for life.

Keeping journalists from Northeast is Dangerous

Keeping the Northeast closed for journalists, the Army is dishing out well cooked news reports and leading the country by the garden path to a grave deception about the Northeast reality. Trying to label and count all those killed by the Forces as Tigers and intensify hopes of a war victory over the Tigers is nothing but a dangerous deception of the country by the Government and its Armed Forces.

Nothing can be substitutive of the visit of journalists from Colombo and elsewhere to the Northeast, the theater of war and its tragic consequences. Giving minute details of the war and its consequences in Bosnia with the help of pictures and in the next minute giving only an army-tailored report of events happening in our own country and just a few hundred miles away from Colombo is ridiculous attempt to deceive millions. Why are people and journalists not protesting against such restriction of freedom?

Throttling Effects of the Forgotten Embargo

Nor is the attempt to justify the inhuman embargo and restrictions on the life of the people living in the Northeast acceptable to those still surviving in the war zones. What has the Government achieved by this embargo. People know that Forces have achieved something, at least in their pockets. But otherwise?

Is keeping a population in an enlarged prison-peninsula without basic amenities for life, without sufficient food and medicine, without electricity, transport, postal services etc. and then subjecting them to continuous shelling and bombing to take over the land and people-are these going to pave the way for a reconciliation, peace and unity of the country? Or is it not making the Northeast another colony-imprisoned and supplied with minimum food facilities till they are killed or captured alive?

Those who talk about integrity, sovereignty and unity of the country betray their hypocritical intentions when they cry out for war and more war. Most of these are people who have never even visited these parts but simply want to own the land and rule over the people.

After all the best judges about the consequences of the war are not those who fire the shells and drop the bombs nor the majority living outside of the Northeast who haven't had slightest experience of the horrors of war or its consequences. In these circumstances one has either to visit these places for a direct experience of life-situations or at least believe the word of the survivors from the Northeast.

Options Open to the Government

In the context of a war that is consuming not only lives and property of the Tamils of the Northeast, but also of the whole country, what are the options left for the Government to move towards reconciliation, peace and unity?

One option is to go back into history and consider a withdrawal of all the state forces stationed in the Northeast against the will of a people to enable a natural death of all militancy and terrorism.

The second is to stabilize the war as a permanent way of containing the Tamil protest for self-determination and rule. Will require compulsory military service for all youth including those in robes in order to maintain a Northeast colony!

The third and the more realistic, is to recognize willy nilly the newly emerged leadership of the Northeast Tamils, normalize conditions for human life in the Northeast and move towards a negotiated peace.

State Forces out of Northeast with Honour

More than thirty years of an unwarranted and immoral Army presence in the Northeast (from the 1950s) has given birth, both to terrorism (1977) and to a full scale war (1991-?). For many in the South, for whom the history of this ethnic conflict starts only from 1983 or so, and that too, with the emergence of the LTTE, a wipe away of the LTTE and a military victory may appear a realizable solution and the politicians promises may appear well within reach. But realistically, as President Premadasa reminded us often, there can never be a true victory in this war. Winning the war means losing the other side.

From the beginning when the State Forces were sent to the North and East to put down with ruthless force all forms of Tamil opposition, the Government has over reacted to Tamil opposition and put its foot in the wrong place and in the wrong way. It is still striving to extricate itself without losing face. That is the bitter truth about this military mission to Northeast.

As evidenced in the history of all colonialism (British, French etc.) and imperialism (Americans in Viet Nam), true peace can usher in only with the withdrawal of the provocative Forces stationed in those lands and the consequent disappearances of all militancy and terrorism. This is hard to digest, but that is history and reality.

Otherwise, how long are people in this country to survive with the death and destruction of a war in Northeast and a mortal fear of continuous terrorism hanging on in the South?

Continuing the War with Compulsory Military Service

If pulling out of the Northeast is considered a shameful defeat by the Government and not a rectification of an earlier error in governance, if the majority still want to foster a superiority and dominance over the minority Tamils, then continuing the war with the support of a compulsory military service and international borrowing is inevitable. Increasingly with every Tamil considered as a potential threat, if not a terror, to the majority Sinhalese, then we slide into this horrible situation. Hopefully and happily, the majority of the major race are clearly against such a move.

Talking to the *de-facto* Leadership of the Northeast Tamils

The only sane and realistic approach is to begin acting from the *de facto* situation in the Northeast. Not all is lost. Neither the people have lost their humanity in spite of this prolonged war and inhuman restrictions on life. Nor are the LTTE adamantly war hungry and blood-thirsty as made out to be by emotionally charged reports. There is still hope for sanity, reconciliation, peace and unity of the country.

Speaking about leadership in the present North and East, it must be said at the outset that the absence of a form of democracy as in the South or the absence of elections (however corrupt and manipulated some of them were under the IPKF), does not necessarily mean absence of any leadership among the people there. **People who tend to absolutise the ways of democracy and think only of those ways as valid forms of leadership, will not be able to understand, leave alone accept, the *de facto* LTTE leadership of the Northeast. Whether one likes it or not, as was done by President Chandrika, one has to acknowledge the *de facto* leadership and proceed.**

The long and frustrating experience of Tamils for almost three decades when democratically elected parliamentary representatives were not listened to but heckled and finally thrown out coupled with the two decades of military oppression or state terrorism in the North and East, has given birth to a new form of leadership in the North and East. All those who refer to the LTTE as a child of the Northeast, forget their own contribution for the emergence of such leadership. Who fathered such a leadership? Much more than the politics of the Tamil Congress or the Federal Party, or the combined TULF, it was the oppressive actions of the State Forces sent to the Northeast almost like an army of occupation to suppress any Tamil aspirations with military violence. This has been accepted by President Chandrika too.

Whether one likes it or not, the *de facto* situation is that the LTTE has emerged to leadership, admittedly not through the elections the South is familiar with, but through militancy with the gun. It has established itself

(i) as the only group which articulates the liberative aspirations of the Tamils in the North and East,

(ii) as the only protectors of the people against the violence, shellings and the aerial bombings of the State Forces

and (iii) as the only group that has set up sub-structures (police, courts, education, transport etc.) of governance for human life to continue with some discipline.

The fact that Prabaharan is the *de facto* leader of the Tamil in the North and East is partly the result of the intransigence of the governments who responded to three decades of democratic leadership among the Tamils of North and East with military force and humiliating rejections.

Possibilities of Opening Talks with the LTTE

The Government often justifies their course of present action stating that the LTTE has betrayed the trust imposed on them by the Government and has gone back to its war path, and hence they must be exterminated or weakened before any meaningful action. It is puerile to argue that the blame for the breakdown of talks must be borne entirely by the LTTE. Not to mention the failure of the Government, in not implementing or not bringing to books the bribe-hungry army who refused to implement them, which must be not overlooked or forgotten.

It is the long experience of the Tamils that many promised, agreed upon and even gazetted are not implemented by the army or the bureaucrats. In the political history of this country, how many times the Government either tore freed pacts or went back on its promises to the Tamils? How many times the Tamils felt totally betrayed by the Sinhala leaders?

So the present President is called to demonstrate her states womanship at this hour in calling the LTTE for a resumption of talks.

The LTTE went away from the negotiating table, not because war is a pleasure for them as some cry out in their midsummer madness, but because the Tamils do not believe any more in prolonged talks without an equal effort for their implementation. This applies even to the future. Unless and until some gesture of easing the life of people in the Northeast is made by the Government, no talks are possible with the LTTE. Talks under the threat of a total embargo or under the threat of an elimination by war has no meaning.

In a press interview on Thursday the 17th. of Aug.1995, Minister G.L. Peiris has clearly ruled out even the possibility of a third-party intervention as well as any talks with the LTTE. Understanding third party as a foreign government, we are left with two parties. Out of these two if one is the Government, who is the second? It must be the partner in conflict. If further talks with the LTTE are ruled out, then the Government is effectively saying, that the decision making process will be one sided, that is by the Government in consultation with those outside the North and East, and that decision will be

imposed on the second partner, that is, the Tamils of North and East-against their will. Is this once again the Sri Lankan mode of democracy!

In short, the approach of the Government amounts to dangling an attractive set of proposals before the international community and the southern constituency as its sincere attempt and willingness to solve the problem peacefully through political reforms and at the same time pursuing a war of weapons on the LTTE and of restrictions (embargo on essentials, denial of communication, transport, prevention of journalists to Northeast etc.) on the people of Northeast. This approach of dangling the carrot to the South and wielding the stick to Northeast will only aggravate the situation and become counter-productive to the whole country.

Towards an Immediate Cease-fire and Resumption of Talks

The present path of a war for peace, war to weaken or exterminate the Tigers and in that operation destroying what

is left is counter productive if not suicidal. There is no justification for continuing this war. The immediate need is to show true statesmanship, create conditions for a truly human living in the Northeast and call for a resumption of talks with the LTTE directly or through a third party from where it broke off.

The LTTE leadership, in spite of going away in desperation from the table, has expressed its willingness through the international media that it is still open for peace talks. Without giving too much into a pharisaic mistrust of partners, let an opening be made for such talks even with the help of a third party mediation.

A government that claims itself to be democratically elected and mandated to bring peace and unity must show more understanding and statesmanship. Nothing by way of a return to the table is too costly to avert a disaster to the whole country. ■

The White Woman's Other Burden Western Women in South Asia During British Colonial Rule

by **Kumari Jayawardena**

Western women in the colonies expected to play subordinate roles and help the white man with his very 'masculine' burden of ruling the Empire. But not all foreign women in South Asia were 'Women of the Raj' who thought of India as the 'jewel in the Crown' or Asians as 'half-devil, half-child'

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