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Of Diasporas and Displacements: What does it mean to be Sri Lankan?

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Abstract

It is often contended that the ethnic war in Sri Lanka has ended. In actuality the conflict is ongoing and it has taken a renewed form. In this respect, the question of ethnic identities is often overlooked. The preoccupation with war crimes, political reconciliation and economic progress has overshadowed a very poignant aspect of how a nation is conceived. As the island republic changed its name from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, an ongoing tussle that will remain unresolved for long is the question of what does it mean to be Sri Lankan?

Introduction

‘I look at Colombo and Ceylon, or Sri Lanka, I mean changing names, sometimes maybe you deceive the gods, but I don’t think you are deceiving the people who live in them.’

Excerpt from the book Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas (1998).

In what is termed to be ‘post-conflict Sri Lanka’, what can one infer when a Sri Lankan national insists that he/she is Tamil and not Sri Lankan? What implications are there when one identifies himself/herself as a member of the ‘Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam’ and not the Sri Lankan government? What are the political ramifications to be part of

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the Tamil Eelam diaspora and not the Sri Lankan diaspora? With the prevailing political sentiments pointing towards a divided Sri Lanka, can it be safely assumed that peace has been restored and the ethnic conflict has ended?

I argue that the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has taken a different shape and the state is entrusted with an even greater task of creating an inclusive Sri Lankan identity – an ideal that appears to be implausible given contentions that the Rajapakse administration is vehemently opposed to sharing power with the minority groups. Instead of one Sri Lanka, diasporic sentiments in Canada, Europe and to a lesser extent Australia, render visible the perceptions of two Sri Lankas emerging, each with a separate vision of the state.

Tamil nationalist sentiments are more pronounced in states like Canada, Switzerland and the United Kingdom². According to an International Crisis Group (ICG) report - ‘The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora After LTTE’ - the new organisations formed following the defeat of the LTTE have initiated plans for a Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam and an independent referenda among Tamils in various countries endorsing the call for a separate state’.³ The Tamil diaspora’s continued struggle for a separate state was referred to in another report by ICG - ‘Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Harder Than Ever’ - that emphasises that so long as the issue of war crimes and political negotiations with Tamil political parties remains unresolved, the ‘Tamil diaspora will remain convinced that their community needs the protection that only a separate state can offer’.⁴

Although the war has officially ended and economic recovery is underway, Sri Lanka’s national identity will remain fractured for a long time to come and the role played by the Tamil diaspora serves to accentuate the divisiveness in conceptualising an all-inclusive identity. The strategy adopted by the Tamil nationalist diaspora to call for a separate state highlights that the ethnic issue is unresolved in Sri Lanka. However, it is critical to understand that the Tamils abroad share dissimilar views on the issue of a separate state. Furthermore, the agendas of the Tamil nationalist groups do not necessarily mirror the perceptions of the Tamils in their homeland and this has contributed to abating radicalism in the diaspora.⁵ In view of the myriad perceptions among Tamil nationalist groups, diaspora identity will remain divided among members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

² For further information, see, Dave Besseling. ‘Toronto Eelam’. *Himal South Asian*. October 2009; and, Ramachandra Guha. ‘Tigers in the Alps’. *World Policy Journal*, 20(4), Winter, 2003/2004:63-73.

³ ‘The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora After LTTE’. *International Crisis Group Report*. Asia Report N°186 – 23 February 2010. p.i.

⁴ ‘Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Harder Than Ever’. *International Crisis Group Report*. Asia Report N°209 – 18 July 2011. p.ii.

⁵ For further information, see, Nirmala Rajasingam. ‘The Stimulated Politics of Diaspora’. *Himal South Asian*. January 2011; and Kitana Ananda, V V Ganeshanathan and Ashwini Vasanthakumar. Sri Lanka’s Alternatives Abroad, *Himal South Asian*, December 2010.

Ceylonese Tamil versus Sri Lankan Tamil

In today's context, to regard oneself as 'Ceylonese' and 'Sri Lankan' interchangeably carries similar meaning and at the same time is loaded with nuances that distinguish the terms. To identify oneself with Ceylon rather than Sri Lanka is to claim heritage to the vestiges of a bygone era and pride upon a time when the country was more advanced than even Singapore. Ceylon was saturated with educated talent and its people (Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers and Moors) made contributions to the development of countries like Malaya and the United Kingdom above and beyond their numerically minority status.

Identifications as 'Ceylonese' rather than 'Sri Lankan' underpin an integrity that was once associated with being elitist, English-educated and of a premier class. Members of the Ceylonese diaspora who migrated to Malaya (present day Malaysia and Singapore) still tend to regard themselves as Ceylonese rather than Sri Lankan. In many ways, the continued usage of the term 'Ceylonese' disassociates one from being regarded as 'Sri Lankan' which carries the baggage of a civil war.

In Singapore, the present generation conceives of themselves as an established Sri Lankan diaspora welcomed by their host country, continuing to make significant contributions in myriad fields and perceiving themselves in terms of multiple identities. Their experiences and consciousness are markedly different from the victim diasporas that characterise the Sri Lankans in Canada, Australia and some of the European countries. The connotation of being 'Sri Lankan' is closely tied to refugees, asylum-seekers, Tamil Tigers and terrorism. Some members of the Sri Lankan diaspora in Singapore rather prefer an 'Indian' identification⁶. The glory of Ceylon - a country that in the 1950s was fashioned as the 'Switzerland of the East' - has undergone immense transformations and there exist undercurrents that differentiate a 'Ceylon Tamil' from a 'Sri Lankan Tamil'.

Prior to the escalation of the ethnic conflict, there was no such thing as a 'Tamil diaspora'. Those who migrated during the colonial era regarded themselves as Ceylonese, irrespective of whether they were Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers or Moors. The shift in the domestic policies in Sri Lanka following independence from Britain compelled members of the diaspora to reconsider their notions of home and reconfigure their identity in view of the burgeoning ethnic strife in their homeland. And, diasporic identity continues to be shaped by the ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka and underpins the differentiation in such categories as 'Ceylonese diaspora' versus 'Sri Lankan diaspora'; 'Ceylon Tamil' versus Sri Lankan Tamil'; and 'Tamil Eelam diaspora' versus 'Sri Lankan diaspora'. The differing implications in each of these categories reveal that the Sri Lankan diasporic identity in the contemporary context is conflict-ridden.

⁶ In a letter written by V.K. Pillay in 1991, he argues that though his identity card states his race is Ceylonese, he is a 'Singaporean Singaporean' and nothing more. V.K. Pillay. 'Why I would rather be called Indian'. *The Straits Times*, 5 October, 1991. p.32.

Sri Lankan Diaspora versus Tamil Eelam Diaspora

The Sri Lankan diaspora is commonly linked with the outflow of Tamils and this disregards the ethnic diversities that make up the island state. Theravada Buddhism is the religion for majority of the Sinhalese, Hinduism that of the Tamils and Islam that of the Moor and Malays. Christianity cuts across racial and ethnic lines with thousands of followers most of whom are Roman Catholics. Other important minority groups include the Burghers, Colombo Chettys, etc. All these myriad groups who make up Sri Lanka have migrated overseas over differing periods of time in search of better livelihood. It is common understanding, although inaccurate, that the Sri Lankan diaspora is largely regarded as the movement of the Jaffna Tamil community.

Similar to the Jews who are regarded as a victim and de-territorialised diaspora, the Tamil diaspora in Canada, Europe and Australia define themselves in reference to exclusion and discrimination. Just as how the ‘promised land’ of the Jews flows with milk and honey, the Assyrians in London and Chicago reminisce of their link to the great civilisation in Mesopotamia, the Sri Lankan Tamils also retain an idealisation of the supposed ancestral home – Tamil Eelam – where just order, meritocracy and the individual rights are believed to reside. The quest for a resolution of war crimes, equal rights to education and employment opportunities shapes the psyche of this displaced community now. The retention of collective memories of this nature and myth about their homeland has led to strong identifications with the ‘Tamil Eelam diaspora’ rather than the ‘Sri Lankan diaspora’ which is deemed to be a construct by the Sri Lankan government.

The Tamil Eelam diaspora is a resourceful and powerful grouping with political clout that is arguably incomparable to many other diasporas. The Indians in Fiji, Sikhs in Britain, Palestinians in Kuwait each had a troubled relationship with their host society. Although the Sri Lankan Tamils also experience antagonism, legal or illegal discrimination, what is more striking is their strategic ability to use their host countries as a platform to voice their grievances about the Sri Lankan government. They have achieved considerable success in galvanising public sympathy in the host-countries that they reside in and have mobilised international human rights groups as proxies for their transnational political agendas. The extent to which the dichotomy between the ‘Sri Lankan’ and ‘Tamil Eelam’ identifications will play out in the long run will have consequences on the nature of relations forged between the myriad communities that make up Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

As Sri Lanka aspires to recover quickly from the civil war that dislocated the country, its displaced citizens that now form the Sri Lankan diaspora serve as reminders of enduring ethnic tensions and a racially polarised nation. The presence of ‘Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam’ indicates that the civil war in Sri Lanka is now orchestrated from abroad and

this transformation has resulted in an even more complex understanding of identity and sense of belonging. As long as the ethnic imbalance is unresolved in Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalism abroad will thrive and diasporic identity will remain fissured.

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