Ethnicity in South Asia: The Sri Lankan Context

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Abstract

Ethnicity has gained prominence in South Asian politics today for two reasons. First, the growth of sectarian political parties throughout the region has amplified and redirected ethnic issues to the political limelight. These parties have arisen, or have been resurrected by parochial interests, because of the government's inadequacy or inability to remove ethnic grievances. These parties differ from national parties in that they have a narrow political base, represent the interests of only particular ethnic groups or segments thereof and are dedicated to achieving political ends through violence. Second, the ethnic factor in South Asian politics is sustained also by the international role of the regional countries. In general, it is not only as the case of South Asia, but this alike, most regions of the world are affected by the complexities of ethnicity in which the same catalysts, be they national, regional and global, play an active part. In each case, interaction among these forces make an ethnic group more conscious and accountable in today's context. The findings of the study and descriptions thereof are useful universally and would be helpful for future study that might be conducted in this sphere.

Keywords: ethnicity, outside factors, Sri Lanka, grievance-formation, political bargaining

Basics of Ethnicity

Sri Lanka has been suffering the problem of ethnicity and has struggled to establish peace and social stability since independence. Communal and ethnic conflicts, separatist tendencies, inter-state terrorism and the practice of militarisation are prolonged challenges for the nation. The ethnic tension in Sri Lanka is between the Sinhalese and the Lanka Tamils. The present tragedy is the result of political and cultural rivalry between them, and the ineptitude of the national leadership in reconciling their differences (Kodikara, 1993). The chauvinistic and obstinate attitudes from both the sides aggravate the ethnic problem, and this has led to the creation of space for secessionist tendencies against the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka and demands for an independent state. The conflict is manifested in a variety of ways ranging from political protest to ethnic violence, and from terrorist insurgencies to guerrilla warfare. Ethnic conflicts arise when the multiethnic personality of such a state-centric nation is not adequately expressed in its power structure and in its political system. If it is reduced to the virtual dominance of the major ethnic group, then the very rationale of "nation" is jeopardised and provokes political self-assertion of minority ethnic groups (Maass, 1999). Despite its small size, the island of Sri Lanka is marked by a relatively wide diversity of ethnic groups, divided by language, religion, and to a lesser extent by caste.

At large, the issue of ethnicity is closely related to nation-building and internal stability. Initially the pattern of political development was on the lines of the Western notions of modernisation and its leaders hoped that with the ongoing process of modernisation, parochial attachments would simply disappear. In the course of time and with the rapid expansion of communication and transportation networks, ethnicity in the regions has invalidated most of these assumptions associated with the national development process. As a result, within each country, the separate cultural identities of regions, far from losing social significance and becoming blurred, have in fact reasserted their cultural/regional identities by politically mobilising themselves in order to confront the state system which has failed to recognise or protect their interests. They have rejected the continued validity of national symbols and values and have redirected their allegiance to ethnic symbols and values in order to fight for greater influence within their societies (Hassan, 1993). In most cases the discriminatory policies of the national leadership have encouraged ethnic communities to rise above parochial attachments to form a unified political order.

In the context of ethnicity, instability is a condition in which the established political order is under challenge because of policies that directly and adversely affect certain ethnic interests. In extreme situations this may lead to partial disintegration of the polity while in less serious instances, primordial sentiments tend to reassert themselves. In the circumstances, the best that can be hoped for is to contain them (Enloe, 1973). But we must recognise the fact that often the primordial sentiments are not necessarily obstacles to internal stability; rather institutionalised discriminations that lead to ethnic cleavages are the actual causes of instability within a polity. To attain any measure of permanence in internal stability in political systems, structural changes and attitudinal changes are a must. The first structural change in this direction should be the restoration of a democratic set up where it is absent, as in Pakistan, and where it is present, its redefinition such that the majority tyranny does not become the order of the day, as has been the case of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Above all, a sense of fairness and justice must also prevail among those who exercise effective decision-making power, so that they are not perceived to represent the exclusive interests of a particular ethnic group. They must transcend narrow interests and formulate policy options that seek to benefit all groups within the polity.

Ethnicity in Sri Lanka

Ethnic peace is elusive in Sri Lanka as divergence exists in trying to date the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority community and the Tamil minority community. Recently, a victory has been achieved on the military front, but there has been no advance on the political front. The country is multi-ethnic in nature with varied racial and religious groups inhabiting the island. In Sri Lanka, there is no Christian or Buddhist ethnicity: there are Sinhalese and Tamil ones. It is also an interesting part of Sri Lanka's in that that the two principal communities, the Sinhalese and Tamil, both originated from India. The first to go to the island were the Sinhalese. Later the Tamils attacked the Sinhalese and ruled a part of Sri Lanka and maintained their supremacy in the northern part of the country. The rivalry between these two communities has not died out yet and has an important bearing on the political life and history of the country (Chakravarti, 1978). Thus, the root of the present long bloody ethnic conflict that the nation has seen in recent times is the result of historical competition and enmity. In addition, the linguistic and religious cleavages tend to reinforce each other, that is, the members of each major linguistic group tend to share the same religion. For instance, the Tamils including Tamil Christians take one side and Sinhalese, including Christians, the other. It is because the Tamil Christians were internal to and a part of Tamil or Jaffna society, economy, trade, agriculture and so on. Similarly, Sinhalese Christians were internal to another cohesive socio-economic unit (David, 1996). Physical structures of the island nation have contributed to the widening chasm between the two ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

The two major ethnic communities of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, are poles apart in terms of language, religion and cultural points of view. The Sinhalese are a distinct ethnic group speaking the Indo-Aryan language, Sinhala. They trace their origin to north India, claiming to be the earliest civilised inhabitants on the island. Most of the Sinhalese practice a variant of Theravada Buddhism which received continuous support from the rulers since it was introduced on the island in the 3rd century BC. Today, most Sinhalese consider themselves to be the protectors of Buddhism. Meanwhile, the Tamils as a minority group have a distinct identity in racial and cultural terms. They trace their ancestry to the same period, that of the Sinhalese arrival. They are mostly Hindus and speak the south Indian Dravidian language Tamil. A significant number of them converted to Christianity after the arrival of European powers. However, they both had the same legal status in Sri Lanka during the British rule.

The origin of ethnicity can be traced back to the 1920s when the Indian Tamils organised first in the form of a cooperative movement and later under the Jaffna Youth Congress, a social movement against caste distinctions in Sri Lanka (Narayan, 1998). It was the result of the reluctance of the Sinhalese to take to the regimented life of the estates. The period also witnessed arising political questions relating to the representation in legislature. It posed a threat to the Sinhalese who were opposed giving large numbers of Indians the right to vote as recommended by the Donoughmore Commission in 1928. From the view of the Sinhalese, it meant 1) a dilution of the electoral strength of the Kandyan Sinhalese in most of the constituencies in the Kandyan areas; 2) the possibility of Indian Tamils being returned as representatives of Kandyan Sinhalese constituencies in the event of the splitting of the Kandyan Sinhalese vote between rival candidates; and 3) the likelihood, especially at the time of the Donoughmore reforms of British planters, and/or Indian state Kanganies herding the Indian vote in favour of the candidate of their choice. Later in 1929, the report of the Commission was debated in the Ceylon Legislative Council and the provision relating to the franchise of the Indian immigrants was modified by imposing several restrictions and the communal character

of representation continued thereafter.

Ethnicity Gained Complexity

Earlier the changes effected in the composition of the Legislative Council, in 1909 and 1920, did not go far enough to satisfy the Ceylonese reforms, but in 1923 the Legislative Council was expanded so as to have a majority of Ceylonese unofficial members with a large elective element (Wilson, 1979). At this stage, a cleavage occurred between the Sinhalese and the Ceylon Tamils. While the latter with the support from other majority groups, namely Indians, Muslims, Burghers and Europeans, wished communal representation to be maintained, the Sinhalese reformers asked for the introduction of the territorial principle. In other words, both communities – the Sinhalese and the Tamils – became principal rivals in establishing their cultural superiority and administrative hegemony over the other. Family and familiar locality is often of central significance in the nourishment of loyalty to group and its associated territorial space (Robert, 2009). Thus, in most instances a Sri Lankan's patriotism to his island entity is built upon local experiences and sentimentalities.

In the history and politics of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities are fragmented through customs and separate higher from lower orders. There is nearly a complete absence of inter-caste marriages. Several members of the lower status caste groups have seized the opportunities provided by the modern economic system and have become wealthy. These differences in wealth have created wide class cleavages that cut across boundaries of caste, religion, and language. Because of all these divisions, Sri Lankan society is complex, with numerous points of conflict. The uneven capitalist development that was characteristic of the plantation raj created serious socio-economic divisions within the Sri Lankan society.

The ethnic identities in Sri Lanka strengthened especially in response to the growing influence of Christian religion and English language in matters of social and cultural living in the mid 19th century. In the period, the Buddhist revivalist movement started, it now one of the relatively few nations in the world where Theravada Buddhism has a large following. The Buddhist cultural movement asserted the rightful place of Buddhism and it established a special relationship between Buddhism, the Sinhalese people and the island. The central theme of the movement was that Sinhala Buddhists alone had the original rights to Sinhaladvipa and Dhammadvipa – the land of the Sinhalese and the land of Buddhism respectively. By the time of independence this type of Sinhalese-Buddhist ethno-nationalism had become part of popular thinking. This apart, a fear of Indian domination, particularly of being swamped by the Tamils from across the Palk Strait, figured prominently in the Sinhala-Buddhist discourse.

Clash of Ethnic Identity

In response to the evolution of ethnic identities in Sinhalese, the Tamils of the island felt threatened. In the line of Sinhala thinking, Tamils, Muslims Christians or other non-Sinhalese did not have a place. Although decades before independence there was no such feeling and initially English educated Sinhalese and Tamil elites worked together for constitutional reforms. In 1919 they came together under the banner of Ceylon National Congress whose first president was Sir Ponnambalam, a prominent Tamil. But soon the differences between the two communities surfaced in 1920 following the constitutional reformers which introduced territorial representation. These differences centred on the question of communal representation. While the Sinhalese insisted upon representation according to population strength, the Sri Lankan Tamil wanted representation more than their numbers. The divergent

racial-religious-linguistic congruence of the two communities of Sinhalese and Tamils is further accentuated by a territorial factor. The northern Tamil district being proximate to Tamil Nadu provided for easy inter-state contact and to worsen ethnic strife. This factor may have led to Tamil secessionist demands which posed a threat to the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. Inevitably along with such domestic factors that influenced the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, external forces have played a critical role in aggravating the conflict.

The Sinhalese and the Tamils are not separated by ethnic divide only but educationally, psychologically and geographically too. A recent study about national harmony revealed that there is no school in Ceylon where there is a positive, well-integrated and gradual programme for racial integration, working hand in hand with the community agencies, for the realisation of the aim of making the children better Ceylonese citizens. Under the psychological factor the Sinhalese tend on occasion to group the indigenous Tamils with the Tamils of south India and view them in their entirety as the Dravidian peril. Geographically Tamils, in general, reside in the northern and eastern part of the island and the latter are conservative and community-conscious. Even when opportunities for employment and commerce took them to the Sinhalese areas, they developed flourishing self-contained settlements of their own. These parting tendencies in both the communities developed and strengthened further due to the defective or biased progress in the constitutional history of the nation.

Even culturally, the island Sri Lanka is divided into two nations, namely, Tamil and Sinhala. They have been rivals in the past; they are rivals in the present; and are likely to continue to be rivals in the future. It is a mosaic of self-aware communities distinguished from one another along ethnic, religious or linguistic basis. The political life of Sri Lanka has been closely bound up with these communal and other social differentiations. These traditional groupings formed the basis of politically the most significant loyalties, interests and demands. The Sinhalese and Ceylon's Tamil communities could associate these loyalties with past kingdoms and with specific territories. Because of the force of historical traditions, there emerged within Sri Lanka forms of identity among the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil communities of the country (Jacob, 1983). Although the policies of the British were guided by the objective of creating a homogeneous society in the island, advancement of social mobilisation generated new aspirations and demands and widened concerns with educational opportunities, urban employment and government services, and thus heightening the potential for communal conflict (Samaraweera, 1963). In fact, the nation building experiment in Sri Lanka was based on the language of the majority community, namely the Sinhala, and the religion of the majority, namely Buddhism, that further paved the direction of nationalism based on communal identity.

Ethnicity in Independent Sri Lanka

The deterioration of relations between the two communities of Sri Lanka continued as before after independence of the island nation in 1948, but especially after 1956 when the "Sinhala Only" policy was adopted by the then government. Earlier the Sinhalese and the Tamils were self-conscious about their differences and were mutually suspicious, they were not hostile prior to the language issue. It was the political controversy surrounding the language dispute in the first decade of independence that generated the most severe regional feelings among the Ceylon Tamils. Consequently, communal antagonism became sharper than they had been for generations. After the language controversy the Federal Party (FP) became the principal spokesman of the Ceylon Tamils, replacing its rival the Tamil Congress (TC) which had advocated responsive cooperation with United National Party (UNP) government. Years after

independence the government of the day initiated discriminatory policies harming the interests of Tamils at large creating vacuum for conflicts and antagonism between Sinhalese and Tamils. The issues of discrimination responsible for bringing tussle and bickering were language, administration, education, employment, colonisation of land and the power devolution.

Soon after independence, the island nation had adopted a Presidential system which was found unsuitable to the heterogeneous nature of Sri Lankan society pushing the country into an ethnic mess. In fact, the unitary system in Sri Lanka had completely failed because of the parochial and inhuman attitudes of the Sinhalese political society in satisfying the preserved aspirations of the multi-ethnic people and therefore, the demand of decentralisation and democratic processes had been raised continuously in order to accomplish socio-political equity. The Tamils claimed that due to Sinhalese majority, the Tamil minority cannot get access in the political activities and participation in the governance and the decision-making process of the country (Khobragade, 2007). A strong section of the people believes even today that if Sri Lanka had been provided with the federal constitution at the time of independence, the Sinhalese and the Tamil leaders might have been able to bargain with each other from their political power bases at the centre and the region and the prolonged ethnic conflict could have been prevented.

The grievance-formation on the part of Tamils from the beginning led the making of Federal Party in Sri Lanka in 1949. It was totally devoted to the cause of a separate state for Tamil Eelam and in fact laid the foundation of two-nation theory in the country. It strongly pleaded in favour of a Tamil Eelam and stated in Party's resolution of 1951. The Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka constitute a nation distinct from that of Sinhalese by every fundamental test of nationhood: firstly, that of a separate historical past, in this island at least as ancient and glorious as that of Sinhalese; secondly, by the fact of their being a linguistic entity, entirely different from that of Sinhalese with as unsurpassed classical heritage and a modern development of language which makes Tamil fully adequate for all present day needs; and finally, by reason of their territorial habitation of definite areas, which constitute over one-third of the island (Khobragade, 2009). The political failure of democratic system and chief political parties in resolving Tamil grievances led to the demand of a separate Tamil state, the Tamil Eelam.

Actually, the dysfunctional nature of island's democracy remained unable to make a convincing argument that all the problems that might arise within this could be resolved within the framework of democratic institutions. Because of the politically active young people it had created a sense of nihilism, which considers everything as permissive. In the political field, it means a belief in violence for its own sake. In that kind of situation, the whole young generation would have no political aspirations except for protest for its own sake reflects as to how deeply the dysfunctional nature of Sri Lankan democracy has affected the entire nation and particularly the young. The abandonment of the rule of law and the authority of institutions, which was already visible in 1958, became a much greater problem in the years that followed, with a similar political approach by subsequent governments and even radical experiments to undermine democracy and rule of law.

For the deteriorating ethnic situation of Sri Lanka, the political system adopted in 1948 and the succeeding governments that enjoyed power in a discriminatory manner were responsible. It is said that the history of relations between the Tamils and central government has been a succession of missed opportunities. Even before Independence under the self-government allowed by the British government since 1931, communalist attitudes dominated political life,

culminating in the Tamil claim for parity of Parliamentary representation between the Sinhalese majority and the minorities. Almost in the span of thirty years the political life of the island nation was run by two major political parties – the UNP and the SLFP. In the first phase, each of these parties had a nine-year tenure – the UNP from 1947 to 1956 and the SLFP from 1956 to 1965. In the second, the UNP with its allies had a five-year-run, 1965-1970, while the SLFP, with its partners completed its 1970-1977 term. Despite their long and repeated innings, UNP and SLFP governments, which were clearly Sinhalese dominated, had toyed with the idea of concessions, and all promises came to nothing for the minorities of Sri Lanka.

Ethnicity Turned Violent in Sri Lanka

The 1970s was a decisive one in the political life of Sri Lanka. Sinhalese-Tamil relations deteriorated considerably during the period of United Front rule 1970-77. The Federal Party withdrew in June 1971 from the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly when the latter voted out its resolution on language rights. In 1972, most of Tamil political groupings including the powerful Indian Tamil CWC formed the Tamil United Front (TUF) under the leadership of FP leader SJV Chelvanayagam for purposes of joint political action. In the same year, Chelvanayagam, on behalf of the TUF, resigned his parliamentary seat to obtain a mandate for the establishment of a sovereign "Eelam Tamil" nation. The TUF, in its convention in May 1976, changed its name to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) resolving the restoration and reconstruction of free and sovereign, secular, socialist state of Tamil Eelam to safeguard the very existence of Tamil nation in this country. The Sinhalese paradigm of one country, one nation, one language and one people, compelled Tamil youths to rise against Sinhalese chauvinism.

As a result of the policies of pro-Sinhala governments in Sri Lanka, the two dominant sections of Tamil parties – the Federal Party and Tamil Congress – united to form the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1975 and it, in its Vaddukoddai resolution, adopted on 14 May 1976, a call for the creation of a separate Tamil state of Eelam. Besides citing the existence of an historical Tamil Kingdom in the southern Jaffna districts as the legal basis for a claim to the Eelam state, nine additional reasons were given: the disfranchisement of Indian Tamils (1948 and 1949); Sinhalese colonisation of traditional Tamil lands; the Sinhala Only Act; the favoured position of Buddhism: inequality of opportunity; severance of ties with South India; permitting and unleashing communal violence against Tamils; terrorism against Tamil youth; and the 1972 constitution (Vaddukoddai Resolution, 1978). In reaction to the long-biased policy from the pro-Sinhala government, Tamil militancy emerged in Tamil areas with a number of Tamil militant organisations to fight for their rights against the unending oppressive rule.

With the Tamil political leaders, and their failure in political bargaining and power politics, Tamil youths raised arms against the government. The armed uprising gave birth to political violence as the only means. The armed struggle for the establishment of Tamil Eelam manifested in a variety of ways ranging from political protest to ethnic violence and terrorist insurgencies to guerrilla warfare and ultimately the ethnic conflict became a central problem in Sri Lankan politics. It was the failure of many years of peaceful demonstration by Tamil leaders to win their freedom from the successive Sinhala majority governments, who showed no concern for the Tamil grievances. In addition, it was the result of political and cultural rivalry between the Sinhalese and the Lankan Tamils and the ineptitude of the national leadership in reconciling their differences. While some have interpreted this ethnic rivalry as a clash between two, a "sub nationalism", that of the dominated Buddhist elite and of the minority Tamil elite of the northern peninsula (Wilson, 1979), more often, it seen in political

terms in which the Sinhalese have consistently sought to diminish the cultural and political salience of the Tamils in post-Independence Sri Lanka.

Conclusion and Result

In the initial years, following the independence of Sri Lanka, it was believed that the country would soon attain political stability and the major ethnic groups would get integrated into one nation. But the chasm between the Sinhalese and the Tamil – Sri Lanka's two major ethnic groups – has widened since then and a fundamental shift took place in state society relations. Some in the country believe that elements within the ruling party actively promoted violence, partly to destabilise their own government to enhance their position in a factional struggle for control, and partly to embitter relations between Sinhalese and Tamils in order to promote Sinhalese hegemony. The government maintained that the riots were caused by violent separatist elements within the Tamil minority and by Marxists seeking to overthrow the regime and to promote a general conflagration (Manor, 1984). The anti-Tamil riots of 1958 and the insurrection of 1971 were viewed by the governments in this context.

The anti-Tamil riots of 1958 were remarkable because Sinhalese society accepted them as triumphant violence. In the Sinhalese political consciousness, the violence of 1958 is regarded with pride. Violence was how Tamils who had exceeded the behavioural limits of an ethnic minority could be put back in their proper subordinate place. In a society where ethnic relations are hierarchically ordered, ethnic violence then was also a structural mechanism of re-establishing domination and submission (Uyangoda, 1996). The aftermath of 1971 insurrection also witnessed how even a confrontation of limited violence between the state and anti-state forces could ultimately strengthen and expand the institutional bases of state violence. It was indeed during this confrontation that the state argument for political violence expanded to include the moralistic argument that the state had a legitimate right to exercise violence to protect the people, and that that right should be protected from public scrutiny. In the post-1971 years, any minor political provocation was certain to evoke the violent responses of the state. In the face of a new situation, the character of the Sri Lankan police and armed forces had changed completely over the last decades. Whilst before 1971 they were simply a force for the maintenance of law and order, they later found themselves engaged in military operations, firstly in 1971 with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) revolt and then, after 1974, with the increase in Tamil terrorist activity.

Around the mid-1970s the extremist Tamil groups began to demand a separate state of Tamil Eelam and have been carrying out a prolonged guerrilla struggle.

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