

Sri Lanka: the politics of purity

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The delegations representing the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) met on 28-29 October in Geneva for talks to thrash out a possible settlement to the civil war that has ravaged the island of [Sri Lanka](#) [1] since 1983. They did so against the background of military operations raging on both sides in the country. It was sadly predictable that the politician-warriors at the talks remained entrenched in their mutually irreconcilable positions, and returned [empty-handed](#) [2] to their wounded land of 75,000 war widows, 25,000 child soldiers, 220,000 internally displaced people, and 1,000 people killed since April 2006 alone.

Yet had they stepped back from their political calculations for a moment, they would have found that they spoke the same language: a language of fear and difference, of force and exclusiveness; a language that could only end in insoluble contradiction.

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Among her books are *Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circles of Power* ([New Delhi, Thousand Oaks/ Sage, 2001](#) [4]); *Dressing the Colonised Body: Politics, Clothing and Identity in Colonial Sri Lanka* ([New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2003](#) [5]); and *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* ([C Hurst](#) [6] and [University of Hawaii Press](#) [7], 2006).

This article draws on material in Nira Wickramasinghe's "Sri Lanka's conflict: culture and lineages of the past" ([Journal of International Affairs](#) [8], 60/1, 2007)

The mirage of peace

Both sides attended the Geneva talks with ulterior intentions. The Colombo government was paying lip-service to an international community that had wanted the meeting as a sign of goodwill; the LTTE saw the event as an opportunity to highlight the humanitarian crisis in the north and east of Sri Lanka due to the closure by the government of the [A9 highway](#) [9]. The civilians in Jaffna were once again [sacrificed](#) [10] by the intransigent attitude of both parties.

Since 2004, the governments of successive presidents, [Chandrika Kumaratunga](#) [11] and [Mahinda Rajapakse](#) [12], have sought to undermine the ceasefire agreement reached in 2002 by Sri Lanka's then prime minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe. This created the room for a Sinhalese nationalist backlash. Rajapakse was elected on [17 November 2005](#) [13] promising a just peace, but the overtone was that a military solution was the only option to save the Tamil people from the clutches of the "fascist" LTTE and to protect the integrity of the nation.

In October 2006, government forces were badly hit in two attacks [14] at Muhamalai and Habarana where more than 230 military personnel were killed. The government's response is a plan to double its defence expenditure in 2007 and prepare for a major assault [15] against the Tamil Tigers. The LTTE [16] too is busy rearming.

Thus, exactly a year after the presidential election, and three weeks after the abortive Geneva talks, it is clear that for both sides, the preferred option is war in order to gain unilateral military advantage; establishing a dynamic for peace [17] in the present grim context is a remote prospect.

The only positive element in an otherwise depressing scenario [18] is the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two main political parties: the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP [19]) and the United National Party (UNP [20]), over working towards a political solution in the country that entails devolving power to the north and east. But by the time the military operations are over, it must be feared that the tired, battered and starved populations of the north and east will refuse even a reasonable offer put forward by a government that has shown little compassion for their suffering.

A discourse of purity

In Sri Lanka, where issues of history and territory have been at the heart of the claims and counter-claims of leaders of the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, it is useful to adopt a rhizomatic [21] approach to history [22]: that is, one where the future and past are constantly in the process of becoming each other.

The understanding of culture in Sri Lanka - of statesmen, rebels and practitioners of "conflict resolution" - has predetermined the type of resolution [23] to the civil war in the country and in a sense precluded other frameworks for reconciliation.

Everyone in Sri Lanka - except those dismissed as "spoilers" and "un-liberal" forces - tends to accept that people "have" a culture with clear-cut boundaries and easily recognisable features. The way issues of inequity and difference have been addressed [24] is deeply influenced by this approach.

Furthermore, people forget that the distribution of communities [25] varies from one region to another. While there are areas with a majority of over 80% (Tamil in the far north, or Sinhalese in the far south), there are also areas with approximately 25% minority populations, and areas with approximately equal representation between groups (such as the plantation district of Nuwara Eliya, and the Trincomalee and Amparai districts in the east [26]).

The dominant belief is, however, in purity of cultures compounded by territorial exclusivity: ideas that acquired hegemonic status with the growth of nationalism and anti-colonialism and which have been further entrenched in recent decades. Colonial rule [27] helped propagate the idea that identities were fixed and stable and that one could not jump from one to another.

For example, in the 1920s in his certificate of discharge YG Stephen, an engine-cleaner, had to state his race after his name, in this case Tamil. Nationalists did not contest the reading of society embodied in such requirements: one divided into well-defined and discrete communities. In the early 20th century the Sinhalese lay preacher Anagarika Dharmapala [28] (1864-1933) promoted a national dress [29] for the Sinhalese that would be devoid of external cultural influences: the Sinhalese man should not "show the entire body like the Veddas who wear only a loin cloth, not wear a trouser like the fair Portuguese."

There were of course subversive moments, which should be rekindled, where the power of definition was denied to the colonial power and the apparatus of value-coding displaced: many village tribunal presidents chose to wrap a sarong over their trousers, thus acknowledging both European and Ceylonese customs.

There are many ways in which the order of progress and reason, the implacable dichotomies of colonial thought - east/west, traditional/modern, primitive/civilised - were undone. But nationalism never claimed hybridity and instead reiterated and reinforced the colonial discourse of purity.

The state denies the option of straddling many identities [30]. But in everyday life in border areas, and among coastal communities, men and women spoke (and still speak) two languages and continue to visit all places of worship - Catholic churches, Buddhist temples and Hindu *devales*. In the eastern province, Hindu and Muslim [31] villages are commonly interspersed and there was probably a significant degree of intermarriage in the pre-colonial period [32]. Until recently, Muslims participated in Hindu temple festivals, and some Hindu castes such as the Parayar drummers were given a customary role in the celebration of Muslim saints' festivals.

Beyond the federal argument

Colombo-based think-tanks [33], untouched by the complexity of the population distribution of Sri Lanka and by the overlapping of identities and cultural practices, continue to advocate a federal reorganisation of the state as the formula for solving the "ethnic problem". They are implicitly supported by aid donors [34] and multilateral agencies.

But the formation of cultural enclaves as a solution to the demands for justice by the Tamils of Sri Lanka is both troubling in itself, and inadequate or insufficient. Since more than half of the Tamil-speaking people live outside the would-be devolved regions (i.e. the north and east) it is the Sri Lanka state *in its entirety* that needs to undergo a drastic change.

This would mean sapping the cultural exclusiveness of our schools - organised according to language/ethnic streams, offices, clubs, associations, and political parties. Unfortunately there seems to be no political formation capable of this type of innovative thinking. The possibility of a social-democratic, secular type of rule was closed from the mid-1950s; at that time, both main parties - the UNP and the SLFP - adopted policies that emphasised the majority culture and language, while the old left that harboured more secular values was decimated by the rise of the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (People's Liberation Front [JVP [35]]), a nationalist/populist new left.

Since then, the dominant Sinhala and Buddhist culture and language permeate all institutions and the everyday life of citizens, while minority religions and languages are permitted to exist as cultural forms rather than as political options. Multiculturalism exists only in law; in practice government circulars are rarely written in both languages and police stations are aggressively monolingual. The president of the country addresses his citizens in Sinhala only, wears the Sinhala national dress and is regularly seen on state TV worshipping in Buddhist temples together with his Catholic wife.

In 2006, as part of the Vesak festival [36] that celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha, the state (for the first time in Sri Lanka) decreed an entire week of abstinence for all inhabitants and visitors to the country. Once again the stress was on preserving Buddhism in its purest form rather than accepting its modernity and allowing people to choose the life and mode of religious practice they wished.

The way forward

At a time when the state is openly and often aggressively promoting Sinhalese culture and Buddhism while paying lip-service to multiculturalism, the challenge today is to revitalise citizenship as an alternative to multiculturalism. Reconciliation is only possible within a state structure that recognises multiple identities [37] through multiple acts of identification. Dividing territory according to "cultural identities" with the view to devolving powers should not be considered a panacea.

Sri Lankans deserve better than two federal units, mirror images of each other, each practicing similarly exclusivist policies, each fostering dreams of authentic cultures and pure "races". A parallel strategy is needed, aiming at radically transforming the existing state to ensure that common values of equity and justice for all its citizens are respected. Autonomy for the other can only happen in a state that nurtures pride in cultural *mélange* and hybridity, rather than in the fantasy of the purity and authenticity of cultures.

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- [16] http://www.cfr.org/publication/9242/liberation_tigers_of_tamil_eelam_sri_lanka_separatists.html
- [17] <http://www.slmm.lk/>
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- [21] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhizome_%28philosophy%29
- [22] <http://www.icescolombo.org/Public/his-wri.htm>
- [23] <http://www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2006statements/410/>
- [24] http://www.southasianmedia.net/Magazine/Journal/sinhalabuddhist_nationalism.htm
- [25] http://www.ices.lk/sl_database/ethnic_groups.shtml
- [26] http://www.ices.lk/sl_database/maps/eastern_map1.shtml
- [27] <http://www.hweb.org.uk/content/view/27/4/>
- [28] <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/public/content/religion/019925236X/acprof-019925236X-chapter-5.html>
- [29] <http://livingheritage.org/toplessness.htm>

- [30] http://www.himalmag.com/2006/november/review_1.htm
[31] http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/7752_1660256,004100180006.htm
[32] <http://cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsidt=1557817>
[33] <http://sarn.ssrc.org/centres/srilanka.shtml>
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