
Sri Lankan identity in a time of siege

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By: Dayan Jayatilaka "All along the watchtower, princes kept the view"

- Bob Dylan, All Along the Watchtower Though it may seem otherwise at first blush, the agitation in Tamil Nadu is not helping the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka. It is hardening majority opinion on the island and serves as a reminder of the existential threat posed to the Sinhalese from across the narrow Palk Straits. It is likely to make the Sinhala majority warier about the degree of autonomy granted to the Tamil majority Northern periphery, susceptible as it may be to the pull factor of Tamil Nadu sentiment given the extreme physical proximity. While Colombo's political commentariat had concluded that the agitation in Tamil Nadu was the avoidable result of Sinhala chauvinism stimulated or tolerated by the Rajapakse administration, it was left to Malini Parthasarathy, respected voice of the educated and highly sophisticated Tamil Nadu elite, a director of the 130 year old Hindu newspaper, and observer-commentator of Sri Lankan affairs since the 1980s, to name the agitation for what it was: Tamil chauvinism. Her editorial was followed by a longer statement by N Ram Editor in Chief of the Hindu, and editorial comments in other respected Indian newspapers which extended the critique to identify the phenomenon as pro-LTTE Tamil secessionism.

Malini Parthasarathy and N. Ram quite rightly pointed to President Rajapakse's pledge to implement the 13th amendment, and the initial action – the electoral process – taken in the Eastern province as sufficient evidence, on balance, of the excessive and unwarranted nature of the Tamil Nadu reaction. While I have been an early and consistent advocate of speedy, substantial devolution of power both for its intrinsic merits as well as for its strategic value in neutralizing external hostility and maximizing much needed external security cooperation, it would be ridiculously a-historical to attribute the agitation in Tamil Nadu to the paucity of devolution or the provocative nature of certain remarks made by elements of the Southern polity. Certainly those remarks were misplaced, ill-timed, foreseeably provocative, and will prove utterly unsustainable in the post-November 4th (US Election) historical context. Tamil Chauvinism across the Silent Sea However, it would take a bout of amnesia or intentional falsification to forget that Tamil Nadu agitation – featuring the same cast of characters – was an important factor during the Indian Peacekeeping Force operation against the LTTE and in support of the 13th amendment. Wounded IPKF soldiers in Tamil Nadu hospitals found themselves less well-treated than the LTTE wounded who had been smuggled across. The slogan of the IPKF as an Indian People Killing Force originated in Tamil Nadu, as did the rumors of Tamil girls being raped by IPKF soldiers. IPKF in Sri Lanka Tamil Nadu support for the LTTE provided the atmosphere in which the EPRLF's K Padmanabha and his entire Politburo were murdered in a machine gun assault in an apartment block in Chennai, for which no one was arrested under Chief Minister Karunanidhi. Indeed the entire propagandistic narrative which justified the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi was shared and disseminated by Tamil Nadu chauvinists. MG Ramachandran was able to play a role in catalyzing Operation Poomalai (the famous "parippu drop") aborting Operation Liberation of the Sri Lankan armed forces, notwithstanding the fact that Colombo and Delhi had been negotiating seriously on devolution at least since late 1985 when Colombo agreed to the province as the main unit of devolution, through the November 1986 proximity talks at the Bangalore SAARC summit, the Natwar Singh Chidambaram mission of November 1986 and the easing of fuel restrictions on Jaffna in April 1987. In short there was an ongoing process of bilateral negotiation on devolution, when Tamil Nadu was still able to play a negative role. Tamil Nadu pressure prevented the IPKF from going flat out against the LTTE. As tellingly, the latent Tamil Nadu factor was able to prevent Indian assistance to Sri Lanka to counter the LTTE's Jaffna offensive of 2000, notwithstanding President Kumaratunga's pluralist discourse and manifest willingness to radically restructure the state. In an interview given to Nirupama Subramanian of The Hindu, President Kumaratunga was to express her grave disappointment. The Tamil Nadu factor prevented Delhi from signing a Defense agreement with Sri Lanka when it was mooted by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, whose commitment to a negotiated, non-military solution was obvious to the point of excessiveness. My point is this: Sinhala chauvinism does exist and plays a negative role but not everything is the fault of Sinhala chauvinism. There is such a thing as Tamil chauvinism, which has an autonomous existence, and poses an abiding threat to Sri Lanka as a single country. This is also a factor in the birth and sustenance of Sinhala chauvinism. However, it is not necessary to adopt a narrow Sinhala chauvinist stand to combat Tamil chauvinism. In 1987, one of our most pluralist politicians, a well –read Buddhist and master of the Sinhala language, Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa released through Godage publishers a book called Golu Muhuda, (‘The Silent Sea’, a reference to the surrounding Indian Ocean) celebrating Dutugemunu's struggle for national liberation against what he saw as Indian Tamil invasion. It was at the same time that he authored a Preface to the official Soviet publisher's Sinhala translation (by Janadasa Peiris) of Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika and had it published in the Sinhala language Lake House press. All Along The Watchtower The discourse of the agitations in Tamil Nadu (and now Karnataka), which involves threats to cross the waters in support of their Tamil co-ethnics, must serve as salutary reminder and warning, as must the hate speech in the cyber spaces of the Tamil Diaspora. This little island has powerful enemies with aggressive, expansionist impulses. The state is threatened and has always been threatened by an enormous horde across the waters that hates us Sinhalese. While Sri Lanka belongs to all of its citizens whatever their ethnicity or religion, while all those citizens have equal rights irrespective of ethnicity and religion, while this island is the homeland not only of the Sinhalese, it is the only homeland that the Sinhalese have. It is where we are coming from and the only place we have to go back to. It is where for better or worse, we belong. It is who we are. Though it does not belong only to us, it is the only place that really belongs to us and in the final analysis, the only place we really belong to. It is not only ours, but it is ours. We must protect it and ourselves, for no one else will. We are unique but we are not superior to anyone else. The fact that our uniqueness does not confer intrinsic superiority does not mean we must forget our uniqueness. It is only on this island, in this combination of space and language that we can be comfortable in our uniqueness. We have our own special destiny, though this is

not a destiny superior to that of any other. We must protect ourselves and our home. Given the dangerous environment we shall always exist in – and for this we must thank Karunanidhi, Vaiko, Ramdoss and the claque of Tamil Nadu filmmakers for reminding us – this island will always have to be something of a fortress with its ramparts and watchtowers. This means that autonomy will have to be finely calculated so that it makes the Tamil people sufficiently comfortable to be integrated into Sri Lanka but is not so excessive as to permit interaction with Tamil Nadu. Devolution must be centripetal not centrifugal. Too little as well as too much devolution can act in a centrifugal rather than a centripetal fashion. Before Barack, After Barack: The Obama Age

The reminder or realization that Sri Lanka will always have to be something of a fortress state is in no way a commendation of the ridiculously narrow minded and backward sentiments that are being aired by those who see themselves as Sinhala nationalists. A fortress cannot survive without supplies, at odds with its changing environment. If Sinhala ultra-nationalism laments the impending victory of Barack Obama (whom I supported in print, way before the Democratic nomination) while the world welcomes it, there is something wrong with Sinhala nationalism, not with the rest of humanity. A Barack Obama victory will tilt the balance between ethno-nationalism and republican civic nationalism in favor of the latter. Ethno nationalism, often antiquarian, holds that an older or majority ethnic or ethno religious community has some greater claim over or ownership of a given territory while modern civic (and especially but not exclusively republican) nationalism holds that every citizen has equal rights and equal ownership of that country. (The Sri Lankan state as defined by the Sri Lankan Constitution is a Republic, and the Constitution is the supreme law to which we all owe allegiance). When General Colin Powell, Jamaican-born former Chief of Staff of the US Armed Forces and US Secretary of State endorsed Barack Obama last week, he gave as one of his reasons his disgust that John McCain had not responded appropriately to an ignorant heckler in a Republican crowd who had shouted that Obama was a Muslim. (As is well known Obama is a Christian who often quotes the Scripture in his speeches). Colin Powell said that Senator McCain should have responded "so what if he is?" and went onto to tell the TV audience about how moved he was about US Muslims dying for their country while fighting against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Iraq. He concluded that he looks greatly forward to the day that the USA has a President of the Muslim faith. In case some Sinhala chauvinist were to scoff that this is good and fine for the USA a new nation of immigrants unlike one with an ancient civilization, one may have to remind them that India, with a 5,000 year civilization and a history that produced the Buddha, Asoka, Gandhi and Nehru, has a population that is 85% Hindu, but a Prime Minister that who is a Sikh (2% of the population), had a President who was a Tamil speaking Muslim (when India had an adversarial strategic equation with an Islamic state), and a pre-eminent politician of Italian Catholic origin. The commonality of values and notions of citizenship between the world's most powerful democracy (the USA) and the world's most populous democracy (India) will be cemented by an Obama triumph. Sri Lanka cannot survive as one country unless it forges a single sense of identity a sense of nationhood which shares those values of inclusion, equality, merit and absence of ethnic or ethno religious discrimination. Especially with the Tamil Nadu factor next door, Sri Lanka can stay united only if its Tamil citizens feel equal citizens and partners of this country. Any sense of suffocation due to insufficiency of autonomous political space; of alienation – which is unavoidable when there is a discourse of discrimination and intimations of inequity ("organic", "visitors", "majority ownership") – leaves room for external attraction, manipulation and intervention. A contented integrated household is an entity which can maintain the friendliest and most productive relations with its neighbor. Only a household with unhappy inhabitants can be subject to manipulation by neighbors, and often will be. A house divided cannot stand, and a house which practices or permits discrimination cannot but be divided. (These are the strictly personal views of the author) (Courtesy : The Island)