
Ethnic relations in Sri Lanka: conflict or concord?

Wednesday, 01 April 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 01 April 2009

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"But I had to roll my eyes to see a brochure which described it (Sri Lanka) as a paradise in which 'different ethnic groups live in total peace and harmony'. Now who could have written that with a straight face?" Nuri Vittachi, 'The grim truth about all those holiday brochures'.

(March 31, Kandy, Sri Lanka Guardian) I have all along been aware that the author of the article referred to above is a highly acclaimed writer. His exposé of holiday brochures last week was no doubt intended to serve the innocuous purpose of giving us yet another dose of light entertainment for which he has acquired considerable fame. Yet his not-so-humorous comment on Sri Lanka prompted me to engage in the usual 'surfing' in order to learn a little more about him. My search was productive in the sense that I did come across information and insights that relate crucially to the observations made in this brief essay on the relations between the main ethnic groups in our country.

First of all let me, like Nuri Vittachi, engage in some fun and show that eye-rolling hyperbole is not confined to advertising in the tourist trade. For instance, there were these snippets of biographical information which I found enjoyable especially after Vittachi's demonstration that exaggeration could sometimes be quite funny.

"Around the time of (Nuri) Vittachi's birth, civil unrest broke out in Ceylon between the Sinhalese majority race and the minority Tamil race, and a strictly enforced communications blackout was in operation. Vittachi's journalist father Tarzie defied the blackout to write a book about the fighting, which was smuggled to London and published by Andre Deutsch under the title Emergency 58. After receiving death threats, Vittachi's family fled to Singapore and later settled in Kuala Lumpur". Here's a more recent thriller:

"Ignoring the bombs going off in the vicinity, leading lights of English literature from across the globe are meeting in the quaint Dutch-built city of Galle in south Sri Lanka for a four-day bonanza of lectures, readings, panel discussions and book launches. About 600 participants, including 50 from overseas, converged on Galle Wednesday as bombs ripped through a passenger bus and an army personnel carrier killing 28 people in the adjacent Moneragala district. Among the leading figures at Galle this year are Gore Vidal, Vikram Seth, William Dalrymple, Simon Winchester, Shyam Selvadurai, Nuri Vittachi and Carl Muller. Sohba De opted out at the last minute".

It is perhaps unnecessary to comment on this type of "straight-faced" writings except for straightening the record on Tarzie Vittachi's 'Emergency 58'. There was, indeed, a press censorship at the time of that upheaval — one based on the realization that much of the mayhem was produced by scurrilous rumour-mongers (which included fringe segments of the local press) but not intended to muffle authentic information on the calamity. The date of purchase noted on the flyleaf of the copy of 'Emergency 58' I now have with me is 16 December 1958, which seems to confirm my recollection (then a third-year undergrad at Peradeniya) that there was no restriction on the type of stuff that Tarzie Vittachi produced. About his "fleeing" (or, "being hounded out of") Ceylon, one would like to believe that Vittachi could not have been frightened by "death treats conveyed over the phone" (by whom, I wonder — Sir Oliver? SWRD? rival journalists?). I do recall, however, the mainstream newspapers (probably in 1960) reporting that he was to take up a prestigious directorship of the International Press Institute.

This "peace and harmony" referred to by Nuri Vittachi, it is well known, cannot be considered an absolute and permanent state. At the risk of sounding banal I should mention that there has been greater propensity for political dispute to find expression in communal violence in countries like India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Philippines or Sri Lanka than in, say, Switzerland, Belgium or Canada, although countries that could be placed in this latter set have had such turbulent times in the past. Nuri might have devoted greater attention to this fact had he read his dad's essay titled 'Tea and Times Roman' published in November 1981 in the New Internationalist according to which:

"The communal quarrel in Sri Lanka keeps blowing hot and warm. Except in rare cases of racial flare-ups which die as soon as passions are spent, communal issues are closely interwoven with the fear of economic deprivation. (Here, what he had in mind could have been the contrast between the Kuala Lumpur racial flare-up of 1969 and the escalating ethnic tensions during the early stages of the Jayewardene regime here. But is the racial-communal distinction really valid? No matter, let's proceed.) And, since economic prospects in libertarian countries are always determined by the class structure of society, the sense of communal deprivation, if not remedied very early, inevitably becomes radicalised into an ideological issue. You can find a close correlation between unemployment, for instance, and the rise of communal tension. Someone has to be blamed for 'taking our jobs away'. And since the market forces which determine economic activity are too remote to be plausible scapegoats, the stranger in our midst — even if he's been around since we can remember — will do. That is how it all began, when the gains of the Korean War boom had been dissipated in the mid-fifties. The answers are likely to be found in economic development and the equitable distribution of those gains across the divisions of class, creed, caste and ethnicity".

Or, would Nuri still prefer the world to believe that what has been going on in Sri Lanka during the past two decades makes a mockery of any claim of peaceful co-existence among the country's ethnic groups? That the

‘LTTE’ is not synonymous with ‘Tamil’, that armed confrontations against the LTTE do not constitute a war waged by the Sinhalese against the Tamils, and that Tiger terror, even in its heyday of ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the north-east in the early 1990s, did not constitute attacks by the Tamil community on other ethnic groups, hardly need reiteration – not now, except perhaps for the benefit of those of the TNA persuasion.

The glimpse we have of Nuri Vittachi’s perception on Sri Lanka’s ethnic relations suggests that he like many others, is being guided largely by the horrors of July 1983. That is perfectly understandable, especially in the case of someone for whom contemporary Sri Lankan affairs probably represent just one shade in a wide spectrum of interests. Those more focused on Sri Lanka should obviously try to acquire a more solid understanding. Admittedly, our own preoccupation with current affairs should not make us forget the lessons from the tragedies of the past. Yet, it would be absurd for us to accept the notion being ardently purveyed by propagandists of the Eelam campaign that what occurred in 1983 was a ‘pogrom’ – an attempt by the Sinhalese to annihilate the Tamils. In this context, our being conscious of the fact that acts of compassion and neighbourly goodwill or those that suggested class solidarity transcending ethnic rivalry (for which there is evidence generated through research) were widespread during the convulsions of 1983 should not be construed as a plea in mitigation of the brutality perpetrated by rampaging mobs.

It is even more important for the post-1983 changes in ethnic relations to be accorded due regard. The violence of July 1983 brought about in its wake a massive displacement (rough estimates place it at about 60,000) of those of the Tamil community from the Greater Colombo area seeking protection either in the Tamil-majority areas of the north or in the hurriedly established security shelters within the city or in the residences of their friends from the other ethnic communities. Some fled to India. Considered against the backdrop of this displacement, subsequent changes in the ethnic composition of the population of this area are of special interest. Though the majority among those so displaced returned to their homes after a lapse of time, it seems that, in the longer term, many among them joined the outflow of migrants (about 300,000) from Sri Lanka to destinations in the ‘West’ on a permanent basis. Despite this loss, there has been a substantial net increase of the Tamil population of Greater Colombo between the census years of 1981 and 2001, in terms of both absolute numbers as well as population ratio. In Colombo District, the percentage of the total population accounted for by the Tamils increased from 11.2 in 1981 to 12.2 in 2001. In absolute numbers this was an increase of 82,365. The increase of the Tamil population in the Colombo Municipal Area alone was 58,291. The city along with the adjacent urban areas of Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia, Kolonnawa and Kotte have accounted for 75,954 (or, 92% of the total district increase).

This increase, moreover, was brought about by the immigration of Tamils into the area from the north-east. As indicated in a post-census publication of the Department of Census & Statistics (2004), out of the total of 206,310 ‘life-time immigrants’ resident in the Colombo city in 2001, 54,732 had migrated from source areas in the north-east, with Jaffna District alone contributing 41,248 to this segment of the population. Of the total of such immigrants from the north-east, almost two-thirds (35,491) had settled down in the city within the 10-year period preceding the census – i.e. after 1991.

Alongside the increase in the minority population ratios of this area, there has been an increase in the Sinhala proficiency among these communities. This is also of some salience to the subject of inter-ethnic coexistence. The census report referred to above shows, for instance, that 71.7% of the Sri Lanka Tamils, 78.4% of the ‘Indian’ Tamils, 84.5% of Sri Lanka Moors, 91.7% of Malays, and 89.0% of Burghers in the age groups of 10 years and above in Colombo possessed (in 2001) the ability to communicate in Sinhala. These percentages are substantially higher than the corresponding estimates recorded at earlier census enumerations, and could be interpreted as representing a pragmatic response of convenience rather than of compulsion involving the dilution of ethnic identity.

There are, of course, many other things that could make the observant tourist feel that the brochure has not hoodwinked him after all. In Sinhalese-Tamil relations, there are the links at the plane of popular religion in the form of similarities in beliefs and value paradigms, complementary rather than conflicting interactions in religious ritual, and shared deities and places of worship. There is, in addition, the overarching religious bond within the Christian churches, confined though it is to about 7% of the country’s population. In politics, some importance should be attached to a trend in the ruling coalition (led by the SLFP – a party that has tended to be associated with an almost exclusive Sinhala-Buddhist electoral base) towards acquiring genuinely ‘united national’ characteristics, drawing support from a formidable array of leaders who could claim to be representatives of their respective communities. In trade and commerce at all levels (but, sadly, not in a few enclaves dominated by king-makers of the underworld) there are no obvious indications of ethnic constraints impacting on enterprises run by Tamils and Muslims. What cannot be ignored or trivialised is that these have survived or acquired increasing prominence over a period during which promotion of communal hatred remained part and parcel of the ‘Eelam’ strategy vigorously pursued here and abroad.

What more could the LTTE have done to instigate a Sinhalese backlash against the Tamils in their midst than massacre thousands of ordinary Sinhalese men, women and children; destroy their most sacred religious site and assassinate scores of their leaders? The fact that this strategy has persistently failed to fulfil expectations for well over a quarter of a century should surely be taken into consideration even in making a passing comment on ethnic relations in Sri Lanka unless, of course, the comment is intended to endorse the main rationalisation of secessionism – namely, that Tamils cannot live in peace and with dignity among the Sinhalese. -Sri Lanka Guardian- Courtesy: srilankaguardian.org