Hostage to the past

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THE DEVOLUTION DEBATE & HISTORICISM By Dayan Jayatilleka “It is this sort of polarisation and distrust which, running through the whole tragic history of the Tamil issue, now permits the past to hold the future hostage…Each fresh confrontation and every violent eruption becomes an instant invitation to an overpowering onrush of self-righteous recidivism, against which reason can only erect the feeblest defences.…”
- Mervyn de Silva [Paradise – and Hostage to the Past, Far Eastern Economic Review, January 26, 1984, pp. 22-23] (July 11, Geneva, Sri Lanka Guardian) The debate on devolution and the 13th amendment between Malinda Seneviratne and me has pretty much reached its terminus. It no longer covers new ground. Malinda’s rejoinder (The Island, Friday July 10, 2009) to my reply (of the previous day) merely rehashes his known position and arguments. Another round and the debate will become almost totally ideological. Therefore I shall limit myself to a few points and observations. Malinda assumes that all identity politics and claims, all solutions based on autonomy for a territorial unit, stem from Eelamist propaganda or susceptibility to it. Now, while all secessionism and all chauvinism is based on notions of distinctive identity taken to extremes, not all identity politics or claims are secessionist or chauvinist, or result in such positions. For instance Sinhala chauvinism results from exaggerated notions of Sinhala identity and notions of homeland but not every notion of Sinhala identity and homeland are chauvinist. The same goes for the Tamils. His diagnosis of why the bulk of the international community urges a solution of territory based political autonomy, leads him to three conclusions: Eelamist agit-prop, Marxist intellectual influence and politicians with a “here-and-now” perspective. None of these explain India’s secular state, quasi federalism and linguistic regions, Chechen autonomy, Spain’s autonomous Basque region, or Mindanao’s autonomy in the Philippines, to name just four disparate examples. Most strikingly, Malinda’s nineteen paragraph article has the words “history”, “historical”, and “a-historical” no less than ten times. He supplements this with one use of “archaeological”.

I have two responses to this overdose of historicism. Firstly, contrary to what Malinda believes, the bulk of Sri Lankan historians and archaeologists with recognized international credentials do NOT conclude, on the basis of their work or “audit”, that there is no basis for a modest degree of internal self-governance to be conceded to the preponderantly Tamil populated Northern province (as distinct from the merged North and East), and nor do they themselves oppose the 13th amendment. I refer to acclaimed scholars such as professors Leslie Gunawardena, KM de Silva, Senaka Bandaranaike, Sudharshan Seneviratne and Michael Roberts. Indeed they may be said to take a position on the conflict diametrically opposed to that espoused by Malinda and his co-thinkers. Secondly, when I hear the word history (repeated ten times, like an incantation) I reach for my philosophy. I recommend Nietzsche’s essay The Uses and Abuses of History for Life (1874) to all historicists. I leave Malinda and the like-minded with some pertinent thoughts of Nietzsche: “For I believe, in fact, that we are all suffering from a consumptive historical fever and at the very least should recognize that we are afflicted with it……In order to determine this degree of history and, through that, the borderline at which the past must be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present, we have to know precisely how great the plastic force of a person, a people, or a culture is. I mean that force of growing in a different way out of oneself, of reshaping and incorporating the past and the foreign, of healing wounds, compensating for what has been lost, rebuilding shattered forms out of one's self… …This is the specific principle which the reader is invited to consider: that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential… …For with a certain excess of history, living crumbles away and degenerates. Moreover, history itself also degenerates through this decay… …When the sense of a people is hardened like this, when history serves the life of the past in such a way that it buries further living, especially higher living, when the historical sense no longer conserves life, but mummifies it, then the tree dies unnaturally, from the top gradually down to the roots, and at last the roots themselves are generally destroyed…

…Create in yourselves a picture to which the future is to correspond, and forget the myth that you are epigones...” (Nietzsche) (These are the strictly personal views of the writer). Courtesy: srilankagaurdian.org, Island.lk