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Understanding Multiculturalism: A Case Study of Sri Lanka

[1] Dr. Deepa Mariam Varughese

[1] Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty), Department of Political Science, Marthoma college, Kerala, India

Abstract*— Cultural conflicts are galore in modern nation states in the form religious rivalry, ethnic divisions, caste conflict, language hegemony and the like. In the 'Clash of Civilizations' of Samuel Huntington jr. whose arguments are severely contested, the main theme is cultural conflict between the Western and Eastern civilizations. He argues that differences in culture and religion create differences over policy issues ranging from human rights to environment. His thesis is that civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight civilizations A state aligned to either a cultural or religious majority could sustain itself only by subjugating the cultural minorities however defined –in religious, linguistic or ethnic terms The subjugated minorities try to assert their identity through aspiring for a separate state and the state in turn seeks to melt the minorities into a culturally homogenous national society.

Keywords*— Culture, Mutliculturalism, Conflicts, Civilizations, Majoritarianism, Subjugation, Minorities, Homogenisation, Political Centralisation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Raymond Williams, in his seminal work, Culture and Society traces the evolution of notion of culture in its present meaning with the industrial revolution of the 19th century. It came to mean first a 'general state or habit of the mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development in a society as a whole'. Third it came to mean 'the general body of arts'. Fourth it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual'.

Raymond William asserts that by way of life it means new kinds of personal and social relationships [1]. Transformed into sociological terms it means religion, caste, family, customs, habits etc. Cultural conflicts are galore in modern nation states in the form religious rivalry, ethnic divisions, caste conflict, language hegemony and the like. In the 'Clash of Civilizations' of Samuel Huntington jr. whose arguments are severely contested, the main theme is cultural conflict between the Western and Eastern civilizations. He argues that differences in culture and religion create differences over policy issues ranging from human rights to environment. His thesis is that civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilizations. The most important conflicts will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another. He writes:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of world politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future [2].

Edward Said calls this the Clash of Ignorance [3]. He says that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture and the internal dynamics or plurality of every civilization has to be taken into account before presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. D.L. Sheth in his essay the Nation state and Minority Rights also agree that it is within the nation state that cultural contests take place and not between civilizations. He says in the third world it is between majority and minority cultures, especially between dominant religions. In the nation formation, he argues, many of these countries ended up by aligning the state with one or the other, usually the dominant cultural religious identity prevailing in the society. In doing so the state acquired either a theocratic or a majoritarian cultural character. The latter tendency became evident, for example, for example in Sri Lanka when the state had to choose the Sinhala language and Buddhism as the epitome of its national identity. In Pakistan when the culture of the dominant region i.e. Punjab began to dominate the state and in Bangladesh when the religion of the majority i.e. Islam became the religion of the state and the defining feature of its national identity. The former, the theocratic tendency asserted itself, for example in the Iranian state after the Islamic revolution when the political authority of the state was not allowed to differentiate itself from the priestly authority of the dominant religion. A state aligned to either a

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cultural or religious majority could sustain itself only by subjugating the cultural minorities however defined –in religious, linguistic or ethnic terms [4].

The subjugated minorities try to assert their identity through aspiring for a separate state and the state in turn seeks to melt the minorities into a culturally homogenous national society. In India in 1960's the Tamil people tried to resist the linguistic domination of Hindi through the assertion of a Dravida ethnicity. There was a strong exclusionary ethnic appeal which had the potential to cause considerable conflict in civil society, according to Narendra Subramanian [5]. Yet Tamil Nadu has experienced limited violence, relative stability and tolerance, a vigorous and autonomous civic life through the nearly three decades of Dravidian dominance.

In Punjab also the state was averse to accommodating demands on behalf of the Sikhs even when these demands did not pose a definite threat to secularism or India's territorial integrity. This urged some Sikh leaders to tactically exchange the banner of religion for one of language during the agitation for the creation of a new state within Indian Union in the 60's. However it did not lead them to abandon a politics of Sikh identity, which took a violent and secessionist turn by the 1980's.

In Jarkhand and Gorkaland the tribals and Gorkas were demanding separate state and the Union government had to yield to their aspirations by allowing a Jarkand state and autonomous Gorkaland Hill Council. The Union government was reluctant in the early years even to initiate dialogue with these D.L Sheth says that the narrow conception of. Nation as a homogenous ethno- cultural community has produced in these societies an intolerant cultural/religious/linguistic majority on the one hand and politically and culturally insecure minorities on the other. The homogenization project of the state, far from dissolving ethnic pluralities has enhanced the process of political ethnicisation of cultural communities. K.N. Panikar says that modern nation state has to take into account the historical evolution of regional cultures and their relationship with the national. More importantly it should be sensitive to cultural plurality within regions as well as religions [6].

II. CASE STUDY: SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka from the 19th century onwards we can find the racial ideas which were applied to discriminate Tamils. Peter Sachalk calls this political Buddhism [7]. Political Buddhism is different from Buddhist politics. Buddhist politics aims at introducing Buddhist values in society. But political Buddhism is controversial because it subordinates Buddhist values to political values.

One special kind of political Buddhism in Lanka is important in our context of study. It defends the integrity and sovereignty of the unitary state. Its character is ethnic homogenization and political centralization. It is an anti democratic form of political Buddhism whose self designation is Simhalatva (ideology of Simhalaness).

Simhalatva is an ideology of a unitary state based on Buddhism. It has different names, jatika cintayana or sinhalata as internal terms and as an outsiders term simhala Buddhist ethno nationalism. Simhalatva leaves no place for other groups to share power. One of the more militant movements is in Sinhalatva is apolitical party named National Simhala Heritage. All the nine MPs of this party are monks.

In Sri Lanka Freedom Party also there is an identifiable section which is loyal to Sinhalatva. They treat the Tamils as extremists. It de-eschatologises Buddhism as a soteriology and transforms Buddhist concepts into political stereotypes. These are used as tools in street fighting, in pogroms and in political discourse in Sri Lankan parliament.

III. ROOTS OF THE CRISIS

The nationalists who took power at independence were members of an anglicized elite subculture. At that time the Indian Tamil plantation workers were politically and socially isolated from Ceylon Tamils who lived mainly in the north and east of the island. Sinhala politicians pictured Indian Tamils, whose ancestors mainly migrated to Sri Lanka in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a foreign group that had thrived at the expense of Sinhalese peasantry. In the midst of the depression it was easy to make them scapegoats. Indian Tamils were denied many of the benefits of legislation passed in 1930's and 1940's, especially those concerned with land policy and shortly after independence they were deprived, with the connivance of Ceylon Tamil Leadership, of both their voting rights and citizenship.

At independence ethnic polarization between the Sinhalese and Ceylon Tamils did not appear inevitable. In the 1950's Sinhalese – Buddhist cultural nationalism emerged as a political force pushing aside the ideologies of secular nationalism.

The dominance of English language in the post colonial set up was preceded by 'Sinhala only' cry. The power of the language issue lay in the fact that it combined a central ideological tenet of cultural nationalism- the purity of the Sinhala language and race and its role in maintaining and defending Buddhism [8].

In 1956 the government of Bandaranaike swept to power and c compromise reached to use of Tamil in north and east but it was not implemented due to Sinhala opposition. Serious rioting started between the two communities where 200 people were killed. It reflected a general trend towards collective violence since the colonial period. The belief that the state has a special duty to the Sinhalese and Buddhism institutionalized since then. In 1971 particularly infuriating was the decision to virtually end recruitment of Tamils into civil service and the establishment of ethnic quotas to university admissions. Frustration also increased when the framers of the constitution ignored Tamil opinion. For the first time there was organized opinion for an independent Tamil state in the north and east of the island and small

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groups of terrorists emerged.

After the 1977 elections won by the UNP there were widespread attacks against the Tamils. This party always emphasized the issue of Sinhala identity. The Indian Tamils, most of who live in poverty have been in no position to resist the erosion of their rights.

Cultural nationalism has been perceived by many Sinhalese as an ideology that will bring them dignity and decent economic position. It has been directed against the Tamils because they have come to be seen as an obstacle to the fulfillment of this vision. It has been supported by the elite because it has allowed them to divert opposition to their own political and economic dominance. Economic and social aspirations have been channeled into cultural conflict.

Jayadeva Uyangoda substantiates this when he writes that one way of reading the contemporary political crisis in Sri Lanka is to relate the protracted ethnic conflict to the unresolved problem of nation formation and state making. There has been a relationship of crisis between the nation formation and state building process leading to the present ethnic conflict. Its defining characteristic has been the political incommensurability of Sinhalese and Tamil nation projects. One major reason for the incommensurability of the Sinhalese and Tamil nation projects is the Sinhala nationalist commitment to maintain Sri Lankan state in the old centralized and unitary form [9].

IV. RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICTS: OPTIONS

1) In the process of conflict resolution the idea of a pluralistic society is very important, says D.L. Sheth. In its framework the minorities could exist as socio-cultural categories which could preserve their ethnic lifestyles, their cuisines and costumes, they could organize their own political parties or support political parties of their choice in competitive representational politics. But new discourses on multiculturalism seek to conceive majority-minority relations as relations between politically equal cultural collectives, with the latter needing special rights to protect their cultural identity. Thus providing additional or special rights the cultural claims of communities are addressed to. Nations should move towards multiculturalism, with majority and minority cultures, rather than composite cultures. Such multiculturalism is neither harmful nor dangerous, but necessary, since it enables different religious groups to deal with the modernizing process in active way rather than making them withdraw in lamentation at the inequities of modernisation or endure it as passive victims.

2) Providing autonomous status to culturally homogenous groups. Instead of seeking separate state formation autonomous territories are provided to cultural groupings. The autonomous Hill Council for Gorkhaland is an example in this context. These cultural groups while adhering to the common legal system can maintain an administrative system protecting their cultural ethos. Immediately after independence in India many states were formed on the basis of language issue. A State Reorganization Commission was then constituted and in 1954 this Commission recommended states reorganization on the basis of language. For example the people in the Tamil speaking areas in the then Travancore had been agitating for the merger of these taluqs to Madras and the Commission recommended favourably for it. In 1950's a separate state for the Sikhs was created in Punjab yielding to the demands of the Sikh Community. Thus religion also became a basis of state formation. Thus the cultural aspirations of the people were being recognized with the larger frame work of a Federal nation.
3) Guaranteeing minority rights through constitutional provisions. In the Indian constitution minority rights are part of the fundamental rights. Article 29 says that any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same. The minorities can establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. In South Africa the constitution begins thus 'South Africa belongs to all, black and white.' Jaya deva Uyangoda says that in the context of Sri Lanka there are not only a majority and some minorities, but also many minorities, minorities even within the majority framed in such existential categories as region, caste, religion, caste, language and other identities [10]. There are also local and dispersed minorities. All such minorities should be given protection through constitution in every country to maintain their cultural identity.
4) Mediation between the contending parties through a mediator or multilateral means. In Sri Lanka the Netherlands government offered its mediation between the government and LTTE. While LTTE asked for a separate state the government offered autonomy for east and north. During negotiations in 2002 peace process the LTTE indicated that they were prepared to explore the federal option as an alternative to solution. Internal self determination within a united Sri Lanka is the phrase that the Sri Lankan government and LTTE used in their Oslo communiqué of December of 2002 to qualify the federal option. In October 2003 the LTTE presented to the Sri Lankan government a set of proposals for an interim administration in Sri Lanka's Northern and eastern provinces. Since 2003 the mediation under the auspices of Netherlands failed resulting in a loss of opportunity for reconciliation. In Ireland many governments were involved in the resolution of the Irish problem between the Catholics and Protestants.
5) Dialogue between the people. Navnita Chadha Behera calls these Forging new solidarities through non official dialogues. The inability of governments and their lack of

flexibility to find viable solutions to several key issues have led to non official initiatives by South Asians. This mechanism can be applied to resolve issues between peoples of different cultures and religions. For example the Indo-Pak peoples Friendship, a civil society initiative, helped the easing of tensions between the people of these countries on many occasions and understands issues involved in each other's country. The interfaith dialogues between different religions in conflict situations are a good starting point. In Philippines in Mindanao, where the Christians and Muslims are at loggerheads, recently the religions have taken initiative for dialogue.

6) Using cultural resources for resolution of cultural conflict. In the Indian context, K. N. Panikar suggests, what is immediately required is an all out effort to expand the secular cultural space. It can be achieved only through a vigorous movement which would strive for a secular ethos through cultural Endeavour. The movement should aim to organize on a large scale an institutional infrastructure of newspapers, audio- visual production centers, theatre groups, music societies, local history associations, publishing houses, environmental groups, literacy activity etc.

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