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Wednesday, May 26, 2010

Caste Origins Of Authoritarianism In Sri Lanka—Part 4



[Editor's Note: An interview with **Mr. Basil Fernando** of the Asian Human Rights Commission by Nilantha Ilangamuwa of the Sri Lanka Guardian]

(May 26, New Delhi, Sri Lanka Guardian) Dr. Rathnageevan Hoole in a recent article on the insecurities of the Tamils published in the Sunday Leader ([External Link: Hoole Speaks Of Tamil Insecurities](#)) speaks of the intolerance of the moderate positions among the Tamils. This goes back to, not just something recent,

but something that can be called part of a culture.

In the caste-based social ethos there is no place for moderates. The very nature of the caste-based organisation is that it polarises society in the most naked ways. The concentration of all power, influence and privileges at the very top and the deprivation of power to the largest part of society who engage in labour is the very essence of a caste-based society.

This is taken even further in the development of the untouchables and the outcastes. The polarisation is driven to a point where their existence is not even recognised. The untouchables and the outcastes do not enjoy even the minimum amount of respect that is available even to the lowest strata of society.

What all this means is that such a society can be based on only the use of very extreme coercion. The point at which caste emerges, separating the highest from the lowest would have been the point at which maximum forms of coercion was exercised on the majority of people who constituted the lowest group to accept their position. As these deprivations affect the most basic aspects of life such as food, clothing or habitation no group of persons could have accepted such positions except when they were forced to do so by extreme sanctions and punishments.

Understanding the culture of a caste-based society should essentially be an attempt to understand the coercive methods that would have been used on a large population to the extent that this population would accept these deprivations. It is only when this acceptance happens that the humiliation of these persons becomes a normal way of life. In caste-based societies large populations have arrived at a point where they accept as normal the deprivations that would be difficult for any other person to accept. The deprivation of food and drink, of clothing and shelter are among the most basic elements which the very physical nature of human beings find difficult to accept. The fact that such acceptance has been made to a point that in a society there is some kind of consensus that people accept such deprivations points to a time at which they were driven to a point where they had to accept such a situation purely for the sake of survival.

To transgress these limitations which have been enforced would have been so painful that finally the population accept these things as their normal lot and transmit that conception from generation to generation.

In understanding the kind of problems that develop in Sri Lanka in its recent history one needs to go back to this kind of culture that were made to accept the extreme limitations and deprivations on their lives as normal.

That kind of deprivation was achieved through coercion is made permanent by various kinds of ideologies philosophies which are often transmitted through religion and other cultural mediums. Thus, within such modes of social communication the question of moderation cannot exist. Any kind of a moderate view could give certain advantages to those who are living at the very bottom of society and create a greater space for them to enjoy certain needs that all human beings need to enjoy such as food, drink, clothing and habitation which of course goes together with the makings of families and closer societal relationships.

Ideologies that polarise are therefore an essential component of a caste-based society. On the one hand the polarization at the top means the existence of forms of power that know no restraint. Restraining power by way of moderation by philosophical, social and cultural process of reflection will undermine the coercive practices that are needed to keep deep divisions which are part of society. Therefore the idea of restraining power which goes into the making of societies that develop restrictions on power cannot coexist with the conceptions of a society based on caste.

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Intolerance of the moderate position is not only manifest in dealing with the minorities but it exists within the majority itself. Within the majority itself the ideological tendencies to develop completely polarised views has been a part of the development of the culture within the majority itself. Examples can be shown from every aspect of life but perhaps the most recent examples of the discussions relating to post war justice may be sufficient to illustrate this aspect.

It is one of the most normal aspects of societies which have faced extreme conflicts to make attempts at certain periods when the conflict subsides to look into these problems and to look into the possibilities of peace, reconciliation the ways by which to avoid the recurrence of such conflicts in societies. However, it one were to watch how these discussions taken place since May 2009 in Sri Lanka one would see how much of an attempt there is to polarise the entire issue and to prevent any kind of attempt to take a more moderate and humane view of the problem.

The very recent press interviews by Gunadasa Amarasekara and a few others on a report issued by an international group relating to the post conflict issues is just a sample of the attitude that generally prevails on these matters. Mr. Amarasekara's position, like several others who associate with him was to deny any kind of wrongdoing on the part of majority community or the armed forces. Their position is that no such discussion is even necessary because no such wrong was ever done.

This position arises from an even larger position that is, in this relationship between the majority and the minority no such problems regarding wrongs exists. It is extended only to the discussions between the LTTE and the military. The idea here is that there cannot be any question of any wrong in this relationship.

It is in the very heart of the discourse of right and wrong in a caste based society that those in power can do no wrong. Those in power have the absolute right to use whatever kind of coercion and violence in order to keep those who are below in that position. That is the basic rule in any caste-based society. There is no question of proportionate punishment for wrongs. There is no idea of a kind of wrong that would be valid for those at the top as well as for those at the bottom.

For example, murder done by someone at the top relating to someone at the bottom is not the same kind of crime as if it were done by someone at the bottom against someone at the top. If someone from the bottom dared to do any such act not only him but his family and his clan, his property and everything else could be destroyed without any kind of inquiries or any kind of attempt to understand why such an act has been done. On the other hand if somebody at the top engages in the murder of someone at the bottom that at worst is a minor transgression or it may not be a transgression at all. These are the deeply embedded cultural norms in Sri Lanka as a caste-based society.

Much of the discussions about law in Sri Lanka take place as if there are commonly shared cultural norms within the community on these issues. Education on modern law has always presumed equality before the law and such premises as the bottom line of discussion. However, these are not the cultural norms on which the social relationships at their depths are rooted. At the depth of these relationships are the conceptions of power that can do no wrong and conceptions of those at the bottom that simply have no right to complain about whatever treatment that they receive from those in power.

These norms were created at least ten centuries ago, at least from the beginning of the Polonowara period as far as the entire country is concerned. For Sri Lanka to become a modern society these cultural norms remain a major obstacle. However, the entire political philosophy of governance in real terms is based on these norms. These were the norms that were practiced in the 1971 insurrection which was a group of people from South was involved: it was same in suppression by the JVP for the second time between 1987 to the 1991 period. Once again it was a revolt from within the majority itself. These were also the norms that were practiced even more ruthlessly in the suppression of the rebellions of the Tamil minority and the LTTE. The external justification was that the LTTE was as ruthless as can be. However, that ruthlessness is itself a product of the nature of a society where the dominant culture knows no rules of tolerance and it reproduces in the rebel the same kind of behaviour.

Whatever the reason, at the depth of culture and psychology what exists in Sri Lanka in terms of power relationship is the kind of norms which are based on a caste-based society.

Today it remains the major obstacle for the development of Sri Lanka into a modern society. The principles of moderation, the principles of the equality of all citizens, the principles of law based on mutual respect for all are the norms of modern society. It is to this set of norms Sri Lanka finds difficulty in entering into.

Dr. Hoole makes an interesting observation of the resilience of the Tamil people.

The Tamil people are resilient. You can see how well they have done in the West even when they came with nothing—and I mean nothing, often no money and no qualifications. They are innovative, cohesive and intrepid. To do equally well in Sri Lanka they must be in control of their lives and responsible for decisions that affect their lives as they are in the West.

The same observation can be made of many Sinhalese, Burgher and other Sri Lankans who have rebuilt their lives from nothing almost in different environments. The problem really is not with the people. The problem is with the Sri Lankan cultural ethos and environment which is built on the cultural norms of a caste-based society. Within that environment despite of all the mighty efforts people make they are being crushed over and over again. It is this very resilience of the people that this cultural system cannot cope with. Violence in our society is engendered to crush this very resilient spirit of the people. The more resilient the people become the more violence this culture generates to crush them. That is the problem that this society must struggle to understand and deal with.



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About the author: Basil Fernando is a Sri Lankan lawyer, who has also work as a Senior UN Officer. He is the director of the Asian Human Rights Commission and has written extensively on the human rights situation prevailing in Sri Lanka. He has published several books, and hundreds of articles.

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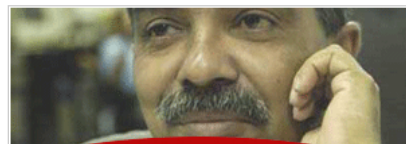


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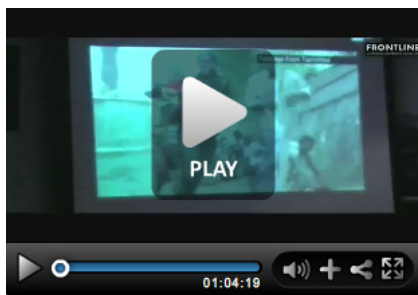
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Friday, May 28, 2010

Caste Origins Of Sri Lankan Authoritarianism – Part 5



[Editor's Note: An interview with Mr. Basil Fernando of the Asian Human Rights Commission by Nilantha Ilangamuwa of the Sri Lanka Guardian]

(May 28, New Delhi, Sri Lanka Guardian) In caste-based societies, one of the methods used to discourage attempts to seek justice is the mockery of tragedies and ridiculing of victims. A caste-based society is a heartless society at all times. It cannot deal with people who complain against the wrongs that have taken place within the society.

Instead of dealing with their complaints, the caste system has devised a number of methods to deter victims from complaining, such as ridiculing those who suffer from tragedies and ignoring protests using unscrupulous methods to denigrate those who persist in complaint-making.

Thousands of examples can be given for illustrating this aspect of a caste-based society. We will take two well known instances from recent times. One is the manner in which Manorani Saravanamuttu, popularly known as the mother of Richard De Soyza, was treated after the disappearance of her son. The other is the more recent case of treatment of Sandhya Eknaligoda, the wife of the disappeared Prageet Eknaligoda.

A number of disappearances in the south during this period were officially recognized to be about 30,000 people.

The abduction and disappearance of Richard De Soyza and the later re-appearance of his dead body on Korlawella Beach was one of the most shocking events for Sri Lankans, particularly middle class Sri Lankans in the 1990s. Following his abduction, his mother, a medical doctor, got herself involved with other mothers of disappeared persons and formed The Mothers Front of Sri Lanka. Ms. Saravanamuttu demanded an enquiry into the abduction of her son and identified Ronie Gunasinghe to be the leader of the team of people who took her son from her house. Ronie Gunasinghe was attached to the security unit of then-president Premadasa. She identified him after seeing him on TV. As she demanded enquiries into her son's death and actively participated in the work against disappearances with other mothers, she came under attack from many quarters. Her own words about the circumstances she faced are quoted below.

"It is the most devastating experience to have a child pulled out of your arms. My boy 'disappeared' and 48 hours later, his mutilated body was found. Since then I have received numerous threats, anonymous letters, telephone terror and I am also certain that my telephone is tapped. I want to pursue my son's case. Many

friends and colleagues have asked me to stop, 'the one who seeks the battle should not complain about the wounds,' but I know there are tens of thousands of relatives who have been affected by the violence. I will never advise the women I work with to forget, I will tell them that they must speak. 20,000 - 30,000 did not join, out of fear of reprisals to other relatives."

The extent to which Ms. Saravanamuttu was pursued by the Ranasinghe - Premadasa regime and those who supported him is well known. There were even attempts to file lawsuits against her on the basis of the complaints she made against officers who she suspected to have abducted her son. As the attacks mounted from every angle, she had less and less friends and it is well known that by the time she died in February 2001, she lived a highly isolated life, thoroughly disappointed by the inhumanity of a society which did not protest against such gruesome inhumanities as forced disappearances.

When the abduction and disappearance of Richard De Soya became a scandal against the government at the time, the government began a campaign to ridicule the personality of Richard De Soya. The emerging leader of the United National Party at the time, Ranil Wickramasinghe, tried to portray the abduction and disappearance as something to do with the sexual orientation of Richard De Soya. He went on to publicize some letters that were alleged to be related to Richard De Soya for this purpose. A malicious campaign was carried out against the personality of Richard De Soya in order to discourage those who demanded enquiries into his abduction and disappearance. It took many years for the inquiries to be conducted, and even today, the whole case has not been resolved in any manner that could be deemed satisfactory.

Reflecting on the situation of the mothers who face disappearances, the words spoken by Ms. Saravanamuttu are worth being quoted again.

"Whether they know why they are doing it, I do not know. Whether they have been told today is the night for so and so. They probably do not question why we are doing this. What has this fellow done to us that we should go and take him, and kill him? That I do not know. But they come. They come with their eyes that are empty of everything. They come with their guns. They come with the assurance that they will not fail in their missions. They come and knock at doors. Ring bells and they look at you, and frighten you, and threaten you. If I had thought for one moment that they had come to take my son I would have died there at the door...it's the women who bear the brunt, and it's the women who are the strong ones, because when you lose a child, you lose yourself." **(quoted from a video interview by Nimal Mendis)**

Nearly twenty years after the disappearance of Richard De Soya, another disappearance caught the attention of Sri Lankan society. This was the abduction and disappearance of Prageet Eknaligoda on January 24th 2009. Following the abduction and demand for inquiries that were made which have become increasingly embarrassing once again a similar pattern of attack on the disappeared person himself and those who are calling for inquiries began to surface. The pattern of behaviour was exactly the same as the manner in which Manorani Saravanamuttu was treated during her tragedy.

Media people who are well known to be associated with the presidential secretariat and security apparatus started attacking the personality of Prageet Eknaligoda. There were attempts to suggest that he was not actually a journalist and attacks on his financial situation, attempt to portray him as a pauper and unscrupulous person who was trying to achieve asylum in another country. It took efforts on the part of his friends to expose the fact that these claims were baseless. Indeed, the attack on Mr. Eknaligoda's personality did not come from fact, but was fabricated in the name of a cultural tradition which discourages protest by engaging in severe slander campaigns against victims of a tragedy.

This attack was extended to Sandhya Eknaligoda, in the same way that the attack against Richard De Soya was extended to his mother, Manorani Saravanamuttu. Newspaper articles portraying her as a person who is



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fabricating stories and engaged in some kind of drama to get attention was published in newspapers such as The Island. To this date, there have been no apologies for this unscrupulous slandering of family members who have been subjected to one of the worst treatments of society through the forced disappearance of a loved one.

Beneath all this is a mentality that has been shaped by a caste-based society that knows no remorse regarding even the worst tragedies that occur. In all societies, the causing of disappearances is known to be one of the most heinous of all crimes. This recognition does not exist in Sri Lanka.

In the last four decades, as many as 50,000 or more people have been forcibly disappeared in Sri Lanka. These disappearances have involved abductions, followed by interrogations, assassinations and secret burials. This whole process continues to be part of the ethos of Sri Lanka. There has not been a strong enough protest crying out against this heinous crime from the government or the society at large.

Old mentalities bred through centuries of caste-based systems where victims are denigrated as people of no importance is a fundamental part of the Sri Lankan psychological framework. This behaviour of mocking tragedies and ridiculing victims is reproduced over and over again in the country. The country's justice system has been unable to deal with this problem. Thousands of people have gone to courts either by making habeas corpus applications or other petitions to courts, but have not been able to receive adequate justice which would revert the process of absolute indifference that the state and society shows against the most brutal forms of violence which prevail in Sri Lanka.

In the midst of such a cultural tradition, talk of lessons learned and attempts at reconciliation remain nothing but another example of highly organized denial. The whole attempt at commissions is nothing but a process of mocking those who ask for justice. By arranging farcical commissions and inquiries, those who make complaints are brought to greater mockery and humiliation and a message is passed to the whole nation that there is nothing that can be done against injustice but to stomach all insults and injustices and all forms of protest, since they would bear no results. Such is the way centuries of caste practices have been reproduced in Sri Lanka.

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Caste Origins Of Sri Lankan Authoritarianism- Part 6

SUDRA ORIGIN OF ALL SRI LANKANS



[Editor's Note: An interview with [Mr. Basil Fernando](#) of the Asian Human Rights Commission by [Nilantha Ilangamuwa](#) of the Sri Lanka Guardian]

(June 06, New Delhi, Sri Lanka Guardian) That basis of social organization of Sri Lanka, at least by Polonnaruwa Period was the 'caste system' is recognizing as a historical fact. However what has not been revealed is the manner in which such social organization on the basis of caste, was established. The analysis of history in terms of caste has not

yet been done. However analyzing from this point of view can throw light on many of the problem still persisting on contemporary Sri Lankan society.

There may be many reasons for undermining caste analysis. One of the most important reasons is the romanticized view of nationalism, that in its many varieties. The Sinhala nationalist narrative and Tamil nationalist narrative want to present romanticized views of their history as well as their problems. Bringing the internal conflict within each ethnic group in terms of caste would undermine much of the pain of nationalism that is made of its deferent varieties. This is perhaps one of the very reasons why more attempt made to understand the inner dynamics within societies in terms of its own internal problems in which caste place a very important role within the Sri Lankan society.

Dr. S. Rathnajeewan H. Hoole in a very quite incisive analysis in a paper entitle 'Caste as a Hate Crime: Reassessing Arumuka Navalar and Vellala Dominance in Sri Lanka' which he wrote with E. Ellilini Hoole, speaks of 'Sudra's origin on the entire Tamil community. Today Tamils claims to belong to various castes among which 'Vellala' are the dominant caste. More and more people have made claims to belong to this caste in an attempt to claim some kind of respectability within the community. Amusingly according to the Dutch records, numbers of persons belong to Vellala were 30% of the populations while at present this has increased into 50% of the populations, showing clearly various kinds of migrations into this caste. But who are Vellala. Is it a variety of Brahmin caste, which came from India as stated by early historians during Portuguese and Dutch times the Vellalas were themselves Sudras. Is that so, how did Sudras become Vellalas?

Certainly Vellalas are not originate from the Brahmin caste. The Brahmins were forbidden by the 'rules of Manu' to travel by ship and to go abroad. These rules were strictly upheld. Therefore the early migrations from India could not have been from the Brahmins.

A very strict rule within the caste system is that Brahmin could marry only within their own caste and therefore the question of some migrant Brahmins coming and getting married in Sri Lanka and creating more Brahmin was also not possible. In the natural cause of things, the people who migrated early leave their lands when their once who face greater difficulties in their societies and then from this point of view it was the Sudra caste which could have been the early migrants which settle in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka.

Caste Among the Sinhalese

This same premise could be valid in terms of the Sinhalese. The early migrants from India to Sri Lanka, who settle in Sinhala Speaking areas and who latter created the Sinhala civilization would have been Sudras. The creation of the myth attributing a princely status, to the mythical person who is supposed to be the originator of the race is quite understandable. In order to give some respectability to the entire race this person has to be from a princely family or even as a 'Sinhabahu' legend goes, from a lion. While such attempts to give some respectability to race is understandable. However, the fact that it was originally the Sudras that would have migrated to Sri Lanka, is very much more plausible. Therefore, Sinhala speaking people who settled in Sinhala areas were also Sudras. Sudras gradually may also have married into the 'Vadda' community and therefore combinations of Sudra and Vedda communities would constitute the beginnings of the Sinhalese. Clearly any kind of claims that the origination from the Brahmin has to be excluded.

Anyway, in Indian status ladder famers are sudras. Therefore ,Govigamas like the Tamil Vellalas are of Sudra origin. Vijaya of Mahawama, if there was such a person would have been a Sudra. Therefore Sinhala Kings

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like the Tamil ones too, were persons who originated from the Sudras .

Two questions that arise are, what kind of society did the Sudras created at the beginning and At what kind of relationship there was among themselves? The next question is how does Sudra settlements gradually developed the caste habits which belong to the Indian caste traditions without there been migrations from the same Indian castes to Sri Lanka? How does the social aspect of caste system and hierarchical structure, enter into Sri Lankan society?

Re-establishment of Caste system in India

In the Indian society after there was a serious setback of the caste system due to the influence of 'Jainism' and 'Buddhism' in India, there was once again a revival of caste system after few centuries. The revival of caste system and the wiping of the Buddhism happened more or less at the same time in India. There is some knowledge about the manner in which this revival of caste system and the wiping out of Buddhism took place in India. That was done by vigorous social movements which were given a religious coloring, engaging in a systematic repression and persecution of the Buddhists . This was accompanied by a forceful replacement of the caste system, over a long period of time with the support of the rulers of the time. After the 'Asokan' period which supported Buddhism, new dynasty established itself, which was totally opposed to Buddhism and which replaced Buddhism with the Brahmin religion together with the reestablishment of the caste system.

There were village to village reorganization of caste, by Barahmins, who were well instructed on the work of the reorganization and thus virtually an enormous social experiment took place by way reorganizing the society on the basis of caste.

Indian experiment brought to Sri Lanka

By the end of the 'Anuradhapura' period with the invasion of 'Kalinga Maga', there was a period of social reorganization in Sri Lanka. The similar type of social experiment which was carried out in India of reorganizing villages on the basis of the caste principles would have taken place during this time. This reorganization was also connected with the development with the system of monarchy with absolute powers. Thus the development of the monarchy and the development of caste principle during this time transformed Sri Lanka into social organization which was based on caste. Thus the Sudra communities settled at the beginning was transformed into caste based new hierarchy through social transformation which took place latter. However the original populations which settled in the country were Sudras and therefore it was a transformation of Sudra society into caste system with new claims made by various groups for high states.

Thus, despite of false claims for new identities' all Sri Lankans share common identity of being Sudras.

To be continued.....

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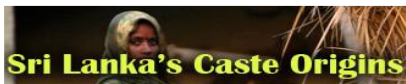
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