

Celebrating Sixty Years of Independence



**INDIA
BENEFITS FROM
THE VISION
THAT
LANKA HAS SPURNED**

On August 15th, our giant neighbour India celebrates sixty years of Independence from the last regime of foreigners. India reaches this landmark preserved as one nation with a population of 1.1 billion where everybody is proud to be Indian first before boasting of any other identity. Furthermore, as a growing economic giant India is unrolling its potential as the world's next superpower. This is all in stark contrast to Sri Lanka, which after fifty eight years since the British left it as one entity, is now in tatters - hopelessly divided and a virtually failed state fighting a war of secession with huge borrowings, a press that prints money, and the remittances of its overseas workers. Bloomberg reports that our Rupee is the fifth worst performing currency out of 180 currencies

The difference in outcome is easily explained in terms of governance: India has over 2000 ethnic groups. Every major religion is represented and four major families of languages are operative. However, the country was blessed with founding fathers of vision - Gandhi, Nehru, and others. The latter opted for a secular state with no state religion and they employed the device of a federal constitution that alone could help keep the diversity together as one entity. In addition, Indian leaders through the ages chose policies and practices that honoured the several distinct identities of its people. A country with diverse peoples cannot run without honouring that diversity.

To be sure, India did face momentous fissiparous tendencies initially and there were many who predicted that the country would break apart repeating the pattern of its history. For example, there was a strong secessionist movement in Madras (now Tamilnadu) led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Today, the DMK shares power at the centre as well as in the state. The DMK and its breakaway ADMK have been ruling Tamil Nadu since 1967.

On the eve of its sixtieth anniversary, India chose as its new President - a woman called Pratiba Patil. She belongs to the Rajputs of Rajasthan. Pratiba is also a well-known feminist who refused to change her surname after marriage. Prior to her, there were eleven Presidents and they were all selected from different ethnic groups. Rajendra Prasad (Hindi speaking, from Bihar), Dr S.Radhakrishnan (Telugu), Dr Zakir Hussein (Muslim) and so went the procession until the last President, Dr Abdul Kalam, came from India's low caste in the South. This is an example of practice that honours diversity. When it came to the crucial question of language, India chose Hindi and English as official languages in the centre and permitted the states to adopt any language they wish as their official languages.

Under SWRD Bandaranaike, Sri Lanka abandoned the English language and made Sinhala

Only as the official language. In this way, early after Independence our leaders set out on a journey toward Sinhala supremacy hoping that the Tamils will assimilate. Mind you, this despite the fact that Tamil leaders had fought side by side with Sinhala leaders to gain independence. Again, despite the fact that unlike in the case of India Sri Lanka's early Tamil leaders did not seek to secede. We had no



Shyamon Jayasinghe

Jinnah demanding a kind of Pakistan then. When the Federal Party was first formed, it was routed at the General Elections of 1952. Had our leaders shown early vision, Lanka could well have averted the eventual development of Tamil militarism that led to the current terrorist campaign.

Leaders like Bandaranaike have passed on to legend as patriots. Our definition of patriot is equated with parochial ethnic loyalty to the "Sinhalese cause" whereas the focus of Indian patriotism is on the country as a whole. The logic of this ideology or value is that India will keep its country together and Sri Lanka will have to keep fighting endlessly to keep the country in one piece. We will have to produce lots of soldiers who die in the war and we will have to self-destruct our economy with no money for development thereby rendering our population poorer.

In recent times, Sri Lanka had a chance to catch up with its lost opportunities when President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge proposed Lakshman Kadirgamar as Prime Minister. However, that was not to be and an illustrious and learned man of our soil - a member of the Tamil community who once famously stated that he wears no labels - was deprived of that honour and was subsequently slain by the Tamil Tigers for his unique contribution in getting the LTTE condemned before the global community. What a won-

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Even the Speakers who were chosen, except for Bakeer Markar, belonged to the majority community of Govigama Buddhists: Sir Francis Molamure, R.S. Pelola, Stanley Tillekaratne, Anandatissa de Alwis, E.L. Senanayake, K.B. Ratnayake, Anura Bandaranaike and now W.J.M. Lokubandara. It was an open secret at the time that our patriotic monks pressured J.R. Jayewardene to replace Bakeer Markar with E.L. Senanayake.

It is evident that we have been conditioned to believe in an ideology of majoritarian supremacy that has been the bane of our island. We have been just unable

to cope with the diversity that has inevitably grown on our soil. The very idea of living in inequality with another community and sharing power with it is something that cannot be digested by many of us. The graphic historical experience we have had of an angered minority being able to cripple majority government has not done anything to make us look beyond conditioned limits. We refuse to see that the very definition of the Tamils as a minority needs questioning when one looks at the geopolitical reality of sixty million of their brethren living just twenty six miles away in Tamilnadu. In brief, we have lived in a cocoon locked out of reality.

A genuine sharing of power would have to be on the lines of the Indian model. This would involve a departure from the unitary structure and a shift toward even a mild form of federalism. Many perceive the abandonment of the unitary structure as something impossible. These persons have to take note that during the recorded history of 2551 years of Sinhala monarchical rule interspersed with occasional Tamil monarchs, monarchical rule of the entire country as one political entity (i.e. unitary) had been for only 199 years. The present unitary structure is one bequeathed by our British rulers in 1831 following the Colebrooke - Cameron reforms.

Government's present attempt to solve the problem solely militarily without anything on the table for discussion is bound to hit the rocks. While such an approach is derived from a superficial understanding of the national crisis, it will heap more and more burdens on the people by the day and isolate us from the global community.



DR MOHAMED HANEEF IS ONLY THE TIP OF AN ICEBERG

Lasantha Pethiyagoda

From the moment the American World Trade Centre towers started collapsing again and again on television screens like some crudely made TV ad, Muslims living in the West had suddenly become aliens, and suspected to exude evil. Witch-hunts began in earnest, against people who fitted a certain stereotype. The latest Australian example is Dr Mohamed Haneef, formerly of the Gold Coast, Queensland.

Since 9-11, leaders of some of the Western nations have managed to alienate and victimise this religious group identified by name or nationality, as never before seen in contemporary history. Millions of men and women have been engulfed in humiliation and overwhelmed by anger. The image of evil is constantly portrayed by the mainstream media, with victims made guilty by inference. No local groups seem to be willing to offer them aid or protection, both due to bigotry and fear of repercussions by the authorities.

They are also the migrants and refugees who have sought relief from desperate ordeals. And they are also now the unacknowledged victims of 9-11. I refer to people who are suspect due to their religion or simply because of where they were born. Escaping the horrors of war or injustice, looking for a modicum of security, they discover to their chagrin, that where ever in the West they arrive, they are most unwelcome, scorned by the paranoid public and automatically classified as "persons of interest" to "Homeland" security departments. Some are interrogated and put in detention or then deported as potential "terrorists" only to be persecuted as "traitors" in their countries of origin, although India ensured that her son returned to a hero's welcome.

With each confrontation between Western forces in the Middle-East and their citizens, Muslims in the West are increasingly scrutinised as threats to national security. The "war on terror", a term deliberately intended to totally mislead the people in the West, is increasingly seen as an excuse for discrimination and unbridled bigotry, which was evident in the nude, if you saw or heard our leaders' remarks after Dr Haneef departed Australia.

Profiling of every sort, the pundits argue, would have to be a way of life in future. Those migrants from countries with an Arab or Muslim ring to it, unlike the rest of us who could consider ourselves privileged, now find themselves outside the gates of the oasis they dreamt of. Also, unlike the rest of us, many of them do not have the option of returning, as they were political refugees, where returning would be more hazardous than the departure.

The sentries at the frontiers of wealth in our world now seem to regard the danger of these migrants as somewhat akin to alien invaders from outer space, rather than human beings very much like the rest of us, possessing a noble civilisation and proud history. Those few compassionate souls who rebel against this practice of double standards now feel that speaking out can endanger their families and loved ones, or at least compromise their livelihoods or social standing.

Muslim migrants approaching a western border or airport, are deliberately put into a series of profiles (potential "terrorist", Al-Qaeda agent, Muslim fundamentalist, militant Islamic). While Anglo or European visitors or migrants are afforded all courtesies and waved through, Muslims are routinely grilled about their identity, ("prove to me you are who you say you are, never mind the passport") activities undertaken abroad, people they met or associated with, what