

MAKE SRI LANKA A MELTING POT OF DIFFERENT CULTURES

One can seriously question the meaningfulness of this whole devolution debate going on in Sri Lanka.

The ideology of power-sharing is intrinsically attractive and self-evidentially true. However, the devolution path to power sharing will be terribly short of real power sharing. It is essentially a territorially-based system where, in our example, the people living in the North (and if agreed, the East) are guaranteed the power to make decisions applicable to the region concerned. The problem here is that the primary decisions of governance are not the territorial ones but those exercised at the centre that would have universal coverage for all citizens irrespective of their inhabited territory. National issues like these will by definition rest with the centre. Such issues will cover a broad gamut of subjects like the macro-economy, crucial matters pertaining to education, defence and security, planning etc. Recipients of territorially devolved power are not going to have a direct say on these issues.



Secondly, devolution via the 13th Amendment as currently proposed will not grant real power even in the limited territorial sense. We have a good working example in the Provincial Council (PC) system that prevails today in Sri Lanka. PCs are mere glorified local bodies often overwhelmed by the authority of the President, the Cabinet or even by a powerful Minister who happens to live in the Province concerned. The fact is that PCs are never self-sufficient entities and they have to depend hand to mouth on the centre for their sustenance. The outcome of the 13th Amendment experiment thus far is therefore the creation of another layer of government that is grotesque, superfluous and terribly wasteful.

It follows that even if the limited jurisdictional powers available for devolution on a territorial basis are to be adopted as a system of governance something more autonomous like a Federal system will have to be conceded. But this arrangement is not likely to be accepted by the rest of the Sri Lankan community especially in the context of a long history of secession demand by the Tamils of the region.

In the light of the above, the devolution path to power-sharing makes no sense. Rather, it would only create the ground for further conflict that may turn out to be irreconcilable. The serious concern is that devolution as proposed is based on an acknowledgement of distinct communities and a resulting desire to keep them running parallel and growing in their separate identities. The proposal itself is for some kind of governing arrangement (13th amendment, 13th Amendment Plus, Federalism etc) where each community's identity is safeguarded and their respective interests "protected." The upshot will be a political racism where people are formally divided into separate groups with their respective leaders talking to each other and bargaining as leaders of separate groups. Such an endorsement in stone will carry the potential for further social tension.

It is better to turn our attention towards creating a system of constitutional, administrative and social reform that would look beyond ethnic groupings and toward the eventual amalgamation of all ethnic divi-

sions. In other words, we should convert Sri Lanka into a true melting pot of cultures and ethnicities. Being a small island it is easy to do so. Devolution proposals assume that cultures are homogenous and static entities. They are not; they grow and change and mutate over the years depending on the wider social and political environment that either enables or restricts such change. The Sinhalese or Tamils today are a far cry from the Sinhalese or Tamils of a hundred years ago. Let us create an environment that would permit natural human forces like intermarriage, interaction, and mixture to take place freely and unimpeded. A new and richer (call it 'huppah' if you like) culture will be the eventual outcome. The problem is that today we have an environment that enhances and crystallises ethnic divisions. The devolution proposals will harden that crystallisation.

The real grouse of the broad mainstream of Tamils in Sri Lanka is that they experience a feeling of having been cornered, pressurised and overwhelmed by the majoritarian browbeating of the Sinhala people. This is a natural feeling on the part of a minority of this nature who live in a polity dominated by a seventy-five per cent majority Sinhala population. Many policies of government have demonstrated that this natural fear is justified. The supremacist rhetoric of many majority community leaders only tend to position Tamils as an underclass.



The immediate challenge is on the one hand to eliminate this fear and suspicion that the Tamil community has and on the other to give the latter the self-confidence of being treated as equal citizens. Many steps will have to be taken to ensure this outcome. The fol-

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lowing are some that immediately come to mind: First, as an initial measure one must plan for constitutional arrangements other than territorial devolution that guarantee Tamils a greater say in the centre's decision-making. As an example one may consider the wisdom of increasing the number of Tamil representatives in the legislature reflecting strength more than their population numbers justify. In view of the racial connotations this may be done only under a sunset clause when after a specified date the privilege may be lifted. In the meantime during this temporary period trust building can be fostered.



Second, Tamil language and Sinhala language must be made equally compulsory in the schools system. Witness the importance been given to the study of LOTE in Australian schools. Both languages should also be made compulsory for all public servants. This will naturally require a graduated process of implementation.

Third, laws should be brought in to penalise those who make public statements or who act in a way that can be perceived as being racially discriminatory. This would cover educational texts too. References to ethnic groupings in Birth and Marriage Certificates etc should also be taken off.

Fourth, an independent judicial authority should be set up with powers to investigate and bring to book any complaints of racial vilification and discrimination or the violation of equal opportunities. Something like the Equal Opportunities Commission in Australia?

Fifth, and most important, positive steps should be taken to encourage and foster the physical demographic mixing process of the island's population. Towards this end several measures need be taken: (a) Tamils and Sinhalese should be able to freely live and invest in any part of the country. Laws that restrict free settlement should be abolished (b) Roads and rail system linking the North and South should be developed. One should be able to travel to Jaffna from Colombo in just two and a half hours. This will enable cheaper, faster and more frequent travel and it will eventually break up the isolation of the Tamils in the North. Such a physical opening up of the country is vital. (c) The open market system should effectively cover the North and bring the whole country into a unified and dynamic economic entity with mutual linkages. Money-making can act as the great leveller of diverse populations and a strong and unified market economy will pave the way for all citizens whether in the North or South to have a fair go in the share of wealth. It would all work toward true economic power sharing. The devolution approach is founded on the premise of continuing and powering the Tamils and Sinhalese as parallel identities. The melting pot model being proposed here is aimed at diminishing these two separate identities and paving the road for a genuine and natural fusion.

TO BAN, OR NOT TO BAN, "ADULTS ONLY" FILMS?

Sri Lanka has had a long history of the artistic depiction of women, from prose by respectable monks, to graffiti by travelling artists on rock frescoes of ancient times. Sexuality has also been depicted in religious artefacts and are enshrined as objects of veneration.

However, in the last few decades, in an environment of corruption and a degenerative social framework, commercial interests have increasingly used images of women in bad taste. Exploitation of willing women as models, actresses and advertising fodder has generally been condoned under the guise of modernisation or Westernisation.

Use of sexual innuendo depicting attractive or popular personalities in films, to draw male audiences is not new. While they have used semi-nudity and provocative pelvic dance routines, the entry into sexual acts combined with nudity has been a relatively recent phenomenon. These scenes are obviously designed to arouse sexual excitement with material not considered to consist of any artistic, educational or therapeutic value.

While the exploitation of women as sexual objects in the visual media can give rise to social problems such as domestic violence and higher incidence of rape, any sexuality depicted in films suited for mature audiences should not value masculinity over femininity, thus devaluing women. Glimpses of bodies of "ideal" women shapes should not set artificial standards of expectation by men. Any depiction of women should not be for the pleasure of men; nor should they highlight sexual availability, as women's value in society is thus diminished.

The authorities must weigh the merits of artistic depiction against cheap exploitation of masculine imagination in ensuring a balanced cinematic experience for the people.

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NEW BOOK PUBLISHED IN SRI LANKA INVASIVE PLANTS

Invasive plant scientist Dr. Lalith Gunasekera, Sri Lankan who working and living in Australia published an illustrated guided book to identify invasive plants that affect the biodiversity of Sri Lanka.



Sri Lanka is a tropical paradise and biologically diverse country that is recognised as a biodiversity hotspot of global importance for plants.

There are so many plant species endemic to Sri Lanka and home to a high level of species diversity per unit area than any other tropical Asian country.

Bio invasions have serious negative impacts on the function of the different ecosystems and biodiversity in Sri Lanka. Intentional and unintentional introduction of alien invasive plants and their impacts has to be addressed to maintain biodiversity in the country.

The main objective of this book is to improve the public knowledge, awareness and identification of the most invasive plants that occur in Sri Lanka which has not been addressed in the past. Please help to restore biodiversity of this wonderful country. Prevent the invasion of alien invasive plants.