



Sri Lanka, ever since its political independence has had an elephant in the room; an unresolved issue nagging at leadership from a muted position. The island's political leaders and general population have tucked away the overwhelming need for the development of a truly 'national consciousness.' For centuries the major ethnic group of Sinhala people had regarded its identity as 'Sinhalese,' and the sizeable Tamil population had regarded itself as 'Tamil.' These two are the most ancient of the Lankan ethnicities. Later, was added the Malay and Muslim populations and, after colonisation, came the burger populations. The associated religious mix further compounded the complication. The outcome is that right now we have a Sinhala dominated multicultural population struggling for a common national identity.

Taken individually none of these several groups have been able to expand their psychic identity to cover the whole nation and call themselves 'Sri Lankan.' They may regard themselves as 'Sri Lankans,' but in their consciousness they are Sinhala, Tamil, Burgher and so on. The challenge before the different peoples is to expand that psychic identity. The future of the island is predicated on that fundamental requirement.

Anssi Passi, in an article published in the Fennia-International Journal of Geography, identifies three stages in the successful formation of a regional identity. This model can be easily adopted for the formation of national identity. First is the adoption of a territorial shape. Sri Lanka has this naturally come to her. The second, is the establishment of a conceptual shape. The concept is clearly prevalent in the Sri Lankan instance.



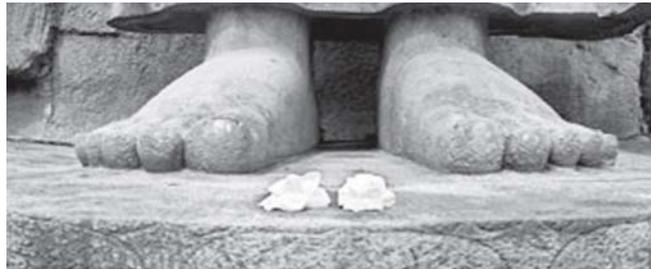
Third, is the establishment of a social consciousness throughout the one geographical and conceptual entity. This is where Sri Lanka has been struggling and this is where the desired psychic expansion is wanted.

This expansion implies a paradigmatic shift—a transformation in the socio-political culture or the rules of the game of interpersonal relationships. Historical development contributed heavily to this national-level problem. The island was always ruled as a kind of confederation of regional people even in times like King Parakramabahu the

Great where historians state the island had been one entity. In ancient times the Tamils were left largely alone-on and oft paying tribute to the King at the centre. That's it. The centre rarely penetrated the body politic of the Tamils who were then largely confined to the North and some parts of the East.

Come the British, for the first time the whole

BUDDHISM'S RELEVANCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY FOR SRI LANKANS



island had been realistically transformed into one unified body politic. The laws introduced by the British embraced the whole island. Our present day Sinhala Buddhist nationalists have never paid tribute to the British colonial masters for that act. Of course, the act of administrative unification was in the interests of the colonial masters. Besides, the colonial masters had been adept at playing the Tamils against the Sinhala and vice versa especially at the later stages of the empire. All that is true, but that does not detract from the hard reality about island unification that was effected by our colonial masters.

It is rather incongruent that Theravada Buddhism for which the island is famous fundamentally inspires the psychic expansion referred

to above. **Buddhism supports the transcendence of narrow identities below the level of our common humanity at two levels. Firstly, at the level of ideology and secondly at the level of practical relationship value.**

The Buddha emphasised the biological oneness of man and stated that the diversities perceived among the human species is but superficial. In a discourse with Bharadvja with reference to cast, he expounded his classic stand on the unity of mankind as a species. The Buddha pointed out that there are no distinguishing characteristics of

genus and species among men, unlike in the case of grasses, trees, worms, moths, fishes, beasts, birds etc. The Buddha emphasised that differences in colour etc seen among men are due to superficial environmental factors and not biological factors. He stated that these perceptions of difference are mere "conventional classifications," (Samanna).

In modern times, Charles Darwin demonstrated with scientific evidence the common

genus and species among men, unlike in the case of grasses, trees, worms, moths, fishes, beasts, birds etc. The Buddha emphasised that differences in colour etc seen among men are due to superficial environmental factors and not biological factors. He stated that these perceptions of difference are mere "conventional classifications," (Samanna).

The social values of pluralism and tolerance stem from a deeper value at the heart of Buddhist thinking. This value is called Metta or loving kindness. Buddhists are enjoined to extend Metta to all living beings. The other value of Karuna (compassion) is actually an application of Metta. These twin values form the centrepiece of practising Buddhists. The Mahawamsa refers to the Buddha as "Mahakarunika," meaning the Great Compassionate One. The good Buddhist is, therefore, a very amiable, empathetic, congenial and large-hearted person. An attitude of violent confrontation is alien to him. He is willing always to collaborate, to accommodate and to compromise whenever a dispute does arise. The classic principles of Metta and Karuna were put into governance practice by India's great Buddhist emperor, Ashoka.

The remaining value of Ahimsa also follows from Metta and Karuna. Ahimsa or non-violence is an art in the hands of a practising Buddhist. An example is when the Buddha on one occasion intervened in a dispute between two tribes—the Skyas and Kollyas. Living on either side of a river. These tribes went to war with each other over the issue of allocation of water. The Buddha intervened and settled it peacefully. Which is more important, the Buddha asked. Is it water or humanity.

It is implied in the previous illustration that the Buddha's approach to conflict resolution was what in modern times we name as "Win-Win." In the Dhammapada the Buddha says:

"Victory breeds hatred
"For the conquered sleep in sorrow;
Casting aside victory and defeat, the peaceful one dwells at ease."

The Buddha was human-centric and his span of attention was focused not on metaphysical issues but plainly on the plight of man's existential pain and suffering. **The Buddha clearly saw man not as he is clad in superficial differences of colour, culture or dress but as just one kind of undifferentiated being. He upheld a borderless vision of men and women. The relationship values of maitri, karuna, upekha and ahimsa; the attendant values of pluralism and tolerance and the conflict resolution values of 'win-win' -all of them underpinning Buddha's thought provide an ideal base for Sri Lankans to achieve the level of psychic expansion and transcendence required to build a unified national identity out of what appears as a motley and diverse population.**

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