

Primacy of occupancy is a losing debate. (1995, September 24). *The Sunday times*.

Primacy of occupancy is a losing debate

As someone who has spent many holidays in your beautiful country, I have been following the debate in the English language newspapers about the present ethnic unrest. Like many others, I have been impressed by the diversity of opinion expressed. I have to say that I have also been dismayed and sometimes disgusted by the racialism evident both in the personal and journalistic correspondence. Statements that would be attributable only to a lunatic (even though substantial) neo-Nazi fringe in Europe or the U.S. appear regularly in the guise of reasonable comment.

The obsession apparent in your papers with the concept of "race" seems anachronistic when DNA research has shown, among other things, that people of African descent are genetically very close to those of European descent, while both are genetically most different from people of East Asian or Australasian descent. This revelation makes the resurgent racialism in the United States and Britain seem as hollow as it is diabolical. In fact the very term "race" has for some time been discredited, and it is with great surprise that I see it repeated in even the most pacifist and pro-devolution commentary.

Ethnic purity is very nearly bogus in most of the world. Anthropologically or genetically, where is the evidence that Tamils and Sinhalese are very different from each other except in language, customs (many of which are similar) and, except among the many Christians of both ethnic groups, religion? Who, in any case, can claim to be able always to tell the two groups apart? I have seen Colombo Sinhalese drivers ask children in the hill country whether they spoke Tamil or Sinhala, unable to distinguish physically this so-called "racial" difference. I have also met Sinhalese in Colombo who were as dark as any African and Tamils who were as light as Kandyans pride themselves on being. Common sense, if not historical evidence would lead us to believe that over centuries of southern migration the putative northern Indian ancestors of the Sinhalese people intermarried and cross-borrowed with people of other ethnic groups. Are we to believe that in thousands of years of coexistence in a relatively small island with good communication by sea, two groups of migrants from different parts of India would not have mingled more than customs?

And to say that the Tamils should "go back to southern India" sounds as hollow as to say the Sinhalese should go back to northern India.

What happens to the thousands of Sri Lankans of mixed Sinhalese and Tamil ancestry in this climate beginning to reek dangerously of ethnic cleansing? Like the Bosnians with Serb and Croat parents, will they be forced to take sides?

To an outsider who is nonetheless sensitive to the historical and economic, and even personal, resentments on both sides of this nationality question, it is very curious that the debate on which group was in Sri Lanka first, or has the right to claim historical precedence. This has to my knowledge completely ignored the patrimony of the silent Veddas, who surely were here before either and could also claim a substantial portion of the country as their "homeland". Primacy of occupancy is thus a losing debate - how far back should you go?

For academics and lawyers, military professionals and statesmen to resort in this day and age to petty and vicious accusations of "racial" purity is repellent and counter-productive

of the rational and conciliatory image Sri Lanka wants, and needs for investment purposes, to portray internationally. I have not been able to read any of the LTTE press, but I wonder if they too, put the issue in visceral racist terms rather than political, historical and economic ones.

Not having seen any publication of the much-touted and much-opposed devolution "proposals" many foreigners like me find it difficult to understand why they have aroused such vehement opposition. From the distilled picture given in the papers, the ideas seem extremely conservative and mild compared to the federalism in the United States or even little multi-cultural Switzerland, which have not to my knowledge been riven by separatist movements.

As for the oft-repeated claim that Tamils have every right to move freely in the south, I recently witnessed a Tamil staff member of an international organisation get refused entry to the Anuradhapura monuments with the excuse that "You never know who he might be!"

As the world becomes more and more crowded, nationalist and ethnic conflicts will increase,

each group finding some way to assert its claim to uniqueness and to dwindling land and resources. In fact, sympathetic observers who have fallen in love with Sri Lanka say that the current conflict will seem irrelevant not too many years from now, when water supply becomes insufficient for the population and is fought over even more bitterly than land or cultural supremacy is now. Sri Lanka's push to colonise the drylands may be disastrous. I have been shocked at the devastation in the past ten years of this country's water-conserving forests. And tourism is per capita the most water-intensive of all industries.

As FAO has pointed out, 15,000 cubic metres of water needed to supply 100 luxury hotel guests for just 55 days is enough for 100 rural families for 3 years, or one hectare of high-yielding modern rice. It may be that conflicts like "Eelam War Three" are the way nature has found to avoid catastrophic overpopulation. It may also be that the only way human beings can maintain any integrity in the face of it is to refuse to be party to divisiveness.

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