

Sri Lanka's recent history of ethnic conflict originates from it's colonial legacy

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'Sri Lanka's recent history of ethnic conflict and political crisis originates from it's colonial legacy.'
How far do you agree?

Introduction

Sri Lanka's recent history of violence has arguably labelled it as one of the most violent of modern states. The situation of violence has taken the form of periodic ethnic clashes, mainly between the Tamil Hindu and the Sinhala Buddhist communities as well as intra communal strife largely within the Sinhala population. The fighting to date has claimed about 65,000 lives and further displaced a million people. Apart from a recent suicide bomb attack in the capital of Colombo, the conflict has been stabilised by a ceasefire since 2002 and further to this with the post tsunami crisis further efforts have been made to initiate peace under such a grave humanitarian crisis.

The situation of violence in Sri Lanka is perceived as a very interesting one as it only emerged post independence in 1947. Categories of ethnic groups have always been apparent since the pre colonial era but as a stark contrast to the recent situation there were never any problems of ethnic clashes and political fighting. How can we then explain the emergence of such ethnic division and political uproar which came to change the social situation in Sri Lanka from its history of a peaceful existence?

Explanations to this are focused around Sri Lanka's colonial legacy which attributes blame to the colonisers for causing the ethnic divide from Sri Lanka's early pre colonial times. I will therefore argue that the recent conflict in Sri Lanka does indeed have direct links to its colonial past but it cannot be reduced to that as the only factor in a simplistic sense as shall be explained. Identifying the misreading of history which has caused inaccurate answers to this question by colonialists with orientalist interpretations is important. Therefore I will point to authors who seek to address the forces underlying ethnic violence in Sri Lanka by placing it in the context of colonial and post colonial dynamics which will provide a more accurate account of Sri Lanka's recent emergence of ethnic violence.

Sinhalese and Tamils

Sri Lanka is a tri-ethnic polity, comprising of two linguistic groups, the Sinhalese majority, a Tamil speaking minority (Ceylon Tamils and Indian Tamils) and a religious based Tamil speaking Muslim group. The problems of ethnic violence however are mainly the consequences of a bi-ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Ceylon Tamils.

The Sinhalese majority make up 70% of Sri Lanka's population and they are mainly of the Buddhist faith. The Sinhalese-Buddhist demographic from history is taken as the island's most dominant in terms of its political social grouping. The Sinhalese find their ancestral origins as immigrants from Northern India but have permanently been residents on the island for over 2,500 years. The distinct Sinhalese identity is linked to Theravada Buddhism, to which their belief gives them a global perspective and where cosmological belief is a core essence in understanding their actions. The Sinhalese are very adamant in holding onto their 'true Buddhism', where in other countries it has been eradicated like in India. The Sinhalese language is referred to as Indo-Aryan Sinhala, which is of Indo-European tongue.

The Tamils of Sri Lanka, like the Sinhalese are also of Indian origin but of the Southern regions. The Tamils are speakers of the Tamil tongue which derived from the Dravidian family, widely spoken in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Sri Lankan Tamils claim residency on the island for over 1,500 years whilst the Indian Tamils descended from migrant workers of the British in the 19th and 20th Centuries to work on the plantations. The majority of Tamils are comprised of the Hindu religion. The Sri Lankan Tamils located in the North and the majority Sinhalese thus form the major players of the recent political crisis.

The Pre colonial and Colonial period

Sri Lanka was first colonised in 1505 by the Portuguese who occupied the coastal regions and their successors, the Dutch who arrived in 1660. Under this colonial rule, The Tamil regions of the North and East were administered as separate political entities to the majority Sinhalese political entities of the island. In 1796, the island came under British rule and by 1815 the whole island was under a single governmental rule. The capital Colombo thus became a central government which the British used as their tool to spread colonialism. What this meant for the pre existent Sinhalese, Tamils and other minority groups is what is described as a colonial re structuring of the island which heavily influenced their relations socially, economically and politically.

The ethnic categories of Sinhalese and Tamil communities have been portrayed as distinct and separate because of their race, language, religion and social manners. Bryan Pfaffenberger illustrates this in his study and argues that Sri

Lanka has been presented to us as an artificial nation, whose boundaries emerged at the convenience of the European colonial powers and whose constituent ethnic groups had little to do with each other before their forced colonial unification. This was the view certainly by the early English in Sri Lanka as evidenced by the words of Hugh Clegham, the colonial secretary of Ceylon in 1799:

“Two different nations, from the very ancient period, have divided between them the possession of the island; These two nations differ entirely in their religion, language and manners”;

It is fair to say that such views distorted the reality of these ethnic groups and further that such views caused divisions to the people who accepted them as historical facts. If we turn to pre colonial times, the Tamils and Sinhalese were people who had very close communication and even had influence on each other in terms of language. Pfaffenberger finds similarities in their kinship systems, caste systems and village rituals. Their cultures are described as remarkably similar to say people living in India as the key unifying factor here seems to be that these groups by living together for such a long period of time became more habitual in their customs and rules of behaviour.

Bruce Kapferer suggests that in pre colonial contexts the ethnic markers of ‘Tamil’ and ‘Sinhala’ had significance as metaphors of a political process, as well as defining kingdoms and the traditions of ruling lineages. These ethnic markers described the identity of a powerful ruling coalition around a cosmic king and those lineages, castes and villages subservient to it. Therefore he points out that in pre colonial history; a king at the centre of the galactic polity could lineally be a Tamil but in fact politically a Sinhala being that he was at the centre of Sinhala ruling lineages. K M De Silva identifies that the autonomous kingdoms as entities which represented the ‘Sinhalese’, Kandy and ‘Tamil’, Jaffna which were fighting against the domination of the British. Non Sinhalese participation in the political life of the kingdom was very common even to the extent of ruling them. An illustration can be found by referring to the last five kings of Kandy, all of who were non Sinhalese. The point here is that people were not at war because they were Tamils in a fixed cultural – reductionist way, which has been the majority view in recent years.

One popular belief is the attitude which fuelled hostility to Tamils as a whole. The Sinhala understanding that Tamils were disproportionately represented in the colonial bureaucratic and other government positions. The suspicion was that Tamils were over-represented in university places, especially in medicine and that they had control over large areas of the economy.

Having received a western and Christian influenced education by western missionaries there emerged a new social stratum of educated English speaking Tamils. This worked to great benefit for the colonial administration that were able to use this class of people as a resource to them. A major misconception here by authors is the underlying form of hostility created by the Tamils and Sinhalese themselves where in fact it was clearly a western form of colonisation through imperialist development strategies and missionaries imposing Christianity onto the people.

On the other side a ‘new class’ of people starts to emerge with a new influx of wealth and redistribution who are Sinhala-speaking and socially part of the cultural life and traditions from which many in the older ruling class fractions, constituted in colonial times, had become removed. Bruce Kapferer mentions that they were heavily engaged in the construction of a social and religious culture of nationalism that would reconnect them with traditions from which they felt themselves previously alienated due to cultural imperialism of the Europeans and British. We can see here how the colonial legacy left an impact on both the Tamils and Sinhalese and the way their identity started to change as a consequence.

But even at this point where a more educated, socially upward and mobile group of Tamils and a Sinhalese new class who are reconnecting with their roots does not cause a kind of tension between the two ethnic groups like the Sinhalese have shown towards the Tamils in recent history. In fact Pfaffenberger notes that it was a unified nationalist elite, of Tamil and Sinhalese western orientated, English speaking leaders who together demanded Ceylon’s independence. He also turns to the period when Tamils stood with the Sinhalese to defeat South Indian imperialism and united the island. The tension therefore can only be seen to start as soon as colonial powers withdraw. Therefore it is clear that ethnic tension and conflict and violence can only be attributed at the time of independence, which means there were factors around this time which caused a different social state than what was existent before.

Postcolonial

Like many colonised states of Asia and Africa, Sri Lanka is said to have gone through a process of decolonisation to a certain extent. For some authors this process explains the emergence of ethnic violence. One of the factors they point to is the major issue of language which has hotly divided Sri Lankans since independence. The Sinhalese are described as attempting to address the inequalities between themselves and the Tamils by discrimination policies because in their view the Tamils received an unfair advantage by reserved seats in education and employment and this fuelled resentment on their side. The Sinhalese in power in 1956 dealt with this problem with a ‘Sinhala only’ policy and further by introducing discrimination policies reducing the Tamil seats in public life. This effected the Tamils very badly as they had previously enjoyed the reserved seats in government and university. Massive state sponsored

agricultural schemes soon resettled thousands of Sinhalese peasants which further reduced Tamil representation in parliament. In response to this we obviously find a reaction from the Tamils as a minority group who are fuelled to stand up for their rights. This has been one of main causes for what was to emerge into a nationalist movement in the recent history of ethnic violence.

The stimulus for altering the Sinhalese identity into a nationalist and racist one included the growing influence of Christianity during the colonial period and the erosion of the Sinhala language by the British as shown above. It was here that bitter sentiments set in whereby a campaign to decolonise a liberal colonial government and restore a native bureaucracy became crucial for their survival. These factors were to unite the Sinhalese community into a potent nationalist force as we have witnessed in recent times. The new Sinhalese identity paved the way for post independence and therefore can be seen as a cause and consequence of Sri Lanka's ethnic crisis. Pfaffenberger illustrates this point:

"The modern Sinhalese identity is a cause of the conflict in the sense that it saw giving away Sri Lankan territory to the Tamils as giving away the historical integrity of Sinhala civilisation. The identity is further a consequence in that Sinhalese leaders, politicians, monks and religious reformers needed a totalising identity";

How can we account for the Sinhalese identity as changing from a peaceful co existence one with the Tamils to such an extreme form as seen in recent times? Tambiah points to the Sinhalese Buddhist texts, most notably the Mahavamsa and Culavamsa which recount a legacy of ancient hatred and struggle between the Sinhalese and conquering South Indian Tamils who contested the Sinhalese for control of the "Land of Kings". Tambiah notes the connection between these texts and Tamils of the North which he says have been deliberately constructed to cause deliberate conflicts and tensions within the last century. As shown above the point made by Kapferer that in the pre colonial era people were not at war because they were "Tamils" as they were shown as interlinked in political and social life and such an inaccurate notion must have been constructed in the colonial period. These myths have asserted a "history" of violence between Sinhala and Tamil and stress the Buddhist hegemony. The military units for example, who are engaged in conflict with the Tamil guerrillas, carry names resonant with the imagery of mythic history

These distorted texts are clearly providing a nationalistic advantage in contemporary times. The danger Kapferer points to is that it naturalises the ethnic present in terms of a past which was probably nothing like it is currently and popularly imagined. It further fails to recognise that the affairs of violence of the chronicles are part of cosmological arguments, probably invented to pursue specific religious, doctrinal problems of a moral nature. Therefore the colonial engagement with ethnic categories radically changed what some writers refer to as the "ethnic consciousness" and the role of "identity". In the process of decolonisation these identities would have been imported by way of indirect rule thereby creating a false identity of ethnic relations between the Tamils and Sinhalese to what existed before in the pre colonial era. It should be noted here that in most Asian and African states that were colonised a similar experience is found whereby identities were socially constructed by colonisers and classes of people who believed in these historical myths.

Such ethnic ideologies have gained potency in a world which is not reducible to its past but has still not yet been completely demythologised. Kapferer illustrates that the process of nationalism, religious revitalisation and cultural demythologisation has re enlivened ways of life threatened in the colonising process. The "history" of myth and of chronicle remained alive in diverse ritual practices and customary activity.

In our explanation therefore as to the factors contributing to the ethnic violence in recent times the limited scholarship on the misreading of history needs to be brought out into the fore as a result of colonial and oriental tampering of Sri Lanka's "real" history of ethnic identity. But as Kapferer makes the point that we cannot reduce the current situation in Sri Lanka to its colonial past but instead we need to recognise that it was features of its colonial rule that had a major impact for the present context.

Many accounts by authors seem to stress only on one factor as an underlying cause. There is much written on Sinhala nationalism for example which is important as a factor contributing to the recent violence but not the only factor. Buddhist revitalising ideology joined to an ethnic consciousness infused notions of Sinhala identity with a sense of conflict and threat. The widespread belief that Sri Lanka is the last place to preserve Buddhism like the Kings did in pre colonial times became a force for their movement as political leaders have in the last decade, the period when intra-and inter-ethnic violence has reached its height, taking it upon themselves to act in this role of kings. Using Sinhalese history, anti imperialism and the Buddhist tradition of the Mahavamsa, western ideas about development a successful nationalist Sinhalese movement gathered potency and has been a powerful force in creating the Tamil nationalist movement as a response.

The cruellest irony that can be viewed in this conflict came into the hands of Sinhalese hegemony as they paved the way for Sri Lankan Tamils to react against them and transform their own ethnic identity so that it would mirror the Sinhala identity in its equation with race, religion, language and territory. The Tamils drew on notions of pre-existent divisions and "historical memory", but largely their force of extreme nationalism was a result of modern causes and

consequences unlike ever before.

Conclusion

Our explanation therefore uses Kapferer and Pfaffenbergers view that the situation in Sri Lanka does have direct links to its colonial past but not in a reductionist way that we overlook the importance of other factors which have contributed to the recent conflict.

By taking into account colonial and post colonial conditions of Sri Lanka's formation we can better grasp its context of ethnic nationalist violence. Sri Lanka's state and bureaucratic forms are certainly examples of formations of capitalist and imperial centres and reveal underlying forces which constructed the roles of ethnic identities. It is such ethnic ideologies which have produced ethnic prejudice and war in recent times. Authors who attribute the ethnic conflict as a manifestation of pre existent relations are following a misreading of history and are ignoring the complex factors which have contributed to this conflict.

This explanation has had to include many diverse factors both real and imagined. It is true that other colonised states were experiencing a similar course of events within their own histories and culture specific situations. Therefore an accurate reading of the real causes behind the ethnic violence can only be found in the pre colonial past and readings which take account of colonial and postcolonial conditions.

In the last 40 years of gathering ethnic tensions and war the social geography of Sri Lanka has been significantly altered by social, economic and political changes Some areas have been 'cleaned' of ethnic diversity and lines of social separation have been more sharply defined than ever before in the modern history of Sri Lanka and to a large extent in our post colonial reading this has originated from its colonial legacy.

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