

# THE SUNDAY LEADER

## **Reconciliation, root causes and reality**

**Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka**

**December 27, 2010**

Received wisdom holds that the roots of the conflict have to be dug up and addressed, if not for which the conflict would recur or reconciliation would not be effected. This school of thought can be identified by their slogan or cliché, that the LTTE did not emerge out of nothing and that it was a response to an unresolved ethnic problem which remains unresolved. Most recent advocates of that view have been M.A. Sumanthiran of the TNA and Rt. Revd Dr. Daniel S. Thiagarajah, Bishop of the Church of South India in the Jaffna Diocese (JDCSI) and Chairman of American Ceylon Mission (ACM). Perhaps “a Daniel come to judgement”? (‘Truth-telling consists of speaking aloud those things kept secret or hidden during the conflict’, Transcurrents). On the other hand there are those who hold that the armed conflict/terrorism was the problem which has now been resolved and there is no further need for reflection.

I have a few problems with both approaches and shall suggest a third. The first approach — “the LTTE didn’t spring out of nowhere, it was a response to the ethnic problem” — is a dangerous cop out. The tribunal in Cambodia investigating war crimes by the defeated Khmer Rouge, is not being told “the Khmer Rouge didn’t emerge from nowhere, they were a response to the problem of US imperialism” while Nuremburg would hardly have regarded as legitimate a claim that Nazism was a response to the unfair Treaty of Versailles. Now it is not untrue that Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge didn’t emerge from nowhere, and that they were a response to the unresolved questions of rural poverty and monarchic rule, US bombing, and military regime installed by a CIA coup, but that begs the main question of the horrific barbarism of the Khmer Rouge. The same was obviously true of the Nazi phenomenon.

The ‘root causes/ethnic problem’ school would certainly be in the right if it foregrounded a set of interlocking questions and followed them up with a reminder of the need to address the root causes. These central questions which Bishop Daniel Thiagarajah and their intellectual ilk avoid are the following: 1. Why did the ‘reaction’ to or ‘result of’ the ethnic problem take the preponderant form of the barbaric LTTE when there were other alternatives available, both armed and unarmed? If the glib response is that Sinhala oppression blocked a peaceful path, the counter is twofold: the Sinhalese didn’t wipe out the TULF, from Amirthalingam and the Yogeswaran couple to Neelan Tiruchelvam; the LTTE did. Secondly, there were militant alternatives such as the PLOT and EPRLF which were not as barbaric and had a dialogue with Southern progressives, so why didn’t the preponderant Tamil response to the unresolved ethnic question converge around them? Here too it must be recalled that the non-Tiger Tamil militants were wiped out, not by the Lankan state but by the Tigers. 2. Why did the ‘reaction to the unresolved ethnic question’ continue, in its armed and barbaric form, even after there were options

available to address if not resolve that problem? How can these intellectuals fail to condemn as illegitimate the LTTE's armed actions from September 1987 when, in the wake of the Thileepan fast, J.R. Jayewardene agreed to an Interim Council of the merged North and East with 7 of 11 seats including the chair reserved for the Tigers? Doesn't the murder of Nehru's grandson give the lie to the theory that the monstrous Tigers and their barbaric violence were but a consequence (inevitable or understandable) of an ethnic issue unresolved by the Sinhalese? When will Tamil civil society openly admit that the Tigers were not simply a consequence but also a cause of the problem and an obstacle to its solution, at least from '87 to 2006? Where is the civil society or intellectual initiative, especially the Tamil civil society initiative that investigates these issues? Is it that Tamil ideologues want to send the Sinhalese on a guilt trip while they do not feel any guilt whatsoever and do not engage in any self critical reflection? Why is the finger of accountability pointed only Southwards? Who on the Tamil side is accountable for spawning and sustaining Tiger fascism? Is this not an absurdly twisted narrative in which the sole or main accountability for Tamil fascism lies with the Sinhalese?

The 'root causes' school has an adjunct proposition: there must be justice for the victims. Sounds good, but let's unpack that. In their re-telling, the victims are (explicitly or implicitly) the Tamil people. What of the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims who lost their lives, limbs and loved ones in acts of Tiger terrorism? Are they not victims? Who tells their stories? What would constitute justice for them?

Thus a colossal moral and ethical fraud by inversion is taking place: those who supported or did not oppose Tiger fascism and terrorism are the victims crying out for justice, while those who opposed Tiger fascism, terrorism and separatism are the oppressors with deaf ears and hearts of stone! Go figure!

Of course none of this means that there should be a taboo on reflecting on 'root causes'. But where does that start and stop; who effects the cut-off and who decides? To each, his or her own 'root cause.' The Sinhala hardliners have their own narrative, which is the Tamil narrative turned inside out, upside down or run backwards.

Let us not replicate the mistake of Orpheus in looking back. Wise scholars have said that societies are divisible between those which look back and those that look forward. The latter succeed. There is obviously something wrong with the way we were; the way we were as ourselves and to each other, which is how we had 30 years of war. It is stupid to believe otherwise. It is worse than stupid not to want to learn the lessons, avoid the repetition of the past and build a better, different future. The best way to do that is to focus on the here and now, the present, the current moment. There is a problem that is over and another that is not, there is a historical outcome after a 30 year long contestation; there is, in short, a reality. Let us take the situation as it is, and fix it, in the light of the mistakes of the past but looking to the future.

There is a reality and effective reconciliatory change must begin with the recognition of that reality. A successful attempt to transform and transcend that reality must be of a sort that reassures the masses that the reality is not sought to be reversed or negated in its most positive aspect; the total defeat of the Tigers and armed secessionism. If the majority perceives that the project to transcend reality is aimed at or would result in, a restoration of the status quo ante, there will be resistance to transformation.

No one, no community, has a monopoly of either victimhood or virtue. In the words of the man who was not himself a philosopher (he remained significantly silent when posed the challenging question 'what is truth?') but about whom more philosophers have written than on any other: "let he who is without sin, cast the first stone". And the

bottom line which all communities and political formations in Sri Lanka should heed: “go and sin no more”. (John 8:2-11)