

'Reconciliation in unitary Sri Lanka a cover for genocide, assimilation'

By Tamilnet

18 June 2012

After threatening the Eezham Tamils with annihilation with the genocidal massacre at Mu'llivaaykkaal, unitary Sri Lanka's idea of reconciliation and the best solution it can offer is assimilation "where the Eelam Tamils will lose all sense of identity and become 'authentic Sri Lankans' i.e. mimics of the Sinhalese," writes RM Karthick, in an article published on JDSLanka . But even as the Sri Lanka implements its model of 'reconciliation' through land grabs, Sinhalese and Buddhicisation, world establishments are compelling the Eezham Tamils in the homeland and diaspora to reconcile with this 'change of ground realities'. Likewise, the concept of 'restorative justice', taken from South Africa being proposed by such establishments in a wrong context to the Eezham Tamils who bear the brunt of genocide will only facilitate eventual assimilation into unitary Sri Lanka.

Referring to implications and pitfalls in the concept of reconciliation as such, and taking from the arguments of Dr. Alexander Boraine, one of the chief architects of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mr. Karthick, a research scholar in the University of Essex, UK, raises basic ethical questions to be asked to the Sinhalese by those arguing for reconciliation, concluding that for genuine reconciliation to happen between the two nations in the island certain fundamental moral and political actions need to be undertaken by the Sinhalese.

The contextual differences between the South African case and the Sri Lankan case are glaring. While in South Africa, it was a privileged minority that systemically practised racial discrimination against the majority, in the island of Sri Lanka, it is a privileged majority nation that uses structural genocide to destroy the homeland of the numerically inferior Tamil nation.

The restorative justice model promoted in South Africa was known for its sharp contrast from the Nuremberg Trials which were based on retributive justice to deal with war criminals and genocide accused, with punishments for those in command responsibility and those following superior orders. The South African model focussed more on reformation of the system and rehabilitation than punishment.

The restorative justice model of South Africa, while it won applause from the promoters of liberal peace, drew strong criticisms from many victims and their families, including the family of prominent Black activist Steve Biko who was killed under the apartheid regime, and internationally acclaimed intellectuals and writers like John Pilger, for giving primacy to a smooth political transition over justice, and for being lenient to those guilty of criminal offences for this purpose.

What this model will mean in the context of Sri Lanka and the occupied homeland of Tamils is that the existing political structure of the unitary state will be taken as legitimate, the Sinhala colonization of Tamil homeland and the erected Buddhist and military structures by the occupying Sri Lankan armed forces considered permanent, while asking both the Tamils and Sinhalese to forgive and forget.

Tamils, likewise, will be asked to give up their demands for the prosecution of those in the Sri Lankan establishment complicit in the genocide and for a political solution based on the concepts of the historical, earned and remedial realities of their sovereignty. These processes are already in motion in the diaspora by organizations like the ICG, International Alert, the Royal Commonwealth Society, One Text Initiative and others.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was one of the champions of the restorative justice model in South Africa, is an important member of International Alert. Along with the Royal Commonwealth Society, International Alert did its own version of a 'reconciliation programme' in early March 2012 by taking "British Sri Lankans" on a trip of the island, sponsored by British High Commission in Sri

Lanka, concluding it on late March with a 'diaspora dialogues' event, promoting the development model of Colombo that seeks to erase the Tamil homeland.

The International Crisis Group, that does not acknowledge the genocide of Eezham Tamils or their right to sovereignty, has also promoted South African model in the recent past.

While Holocaust denial is serious criminal offence in many Western liberal democracies, whether they are not being hypocritical by making the Eezham Tamils submit to a 'reconciliation' that makes them forget the genocide of their own people even as it continues it front of them, asked a veteran Eezham Tamil activist.

This model of justice and reconciliation would mean nothing more than Eezham Tamils being reduced to a vulnerable minority status and losing all claims to their homeland, since the absence of a political solution based on retributive justice would ensure the gradual breaking up of the contiguity of the Tamil homeland and the permanent occupation of Sri Lankan state.

In the article, the author also sardonically points out how such a 'genuine reconciliation' would happen after Sinhala colonization has reached a point of no return in the Tamil homeland and the Tamils are made a scattered minority, arguing that this possibility "is contingent on the idea of Tamil Eelam and retributive justice for what happened over the past 60 years breaking completely among the Tamils not just in the homeland, but in Tamil Nadu and diaspora as well allowing things to reach such a stage."

The Eezham Tamils should carefully observe whether those who come to them with the terms of reconciliation, accountability and justice with this or that model, without recognizing the context of genocide in the Tamil homeland and their right as a nation to self-determination, are actually hoodwinking them into forgetting the genocide of their own people and reconciling with the structure that was responsible.

The full text of RM Karthick's article from JDSLanka, a website run by exiled journalists from the island, follows:

DECONSTRUCTING SRI LANKA'S RECONCILIATION DISCOURSE

When the Lankan government triumphantly announced the 'defeat' of the LTTE on May 19th 2009, there was great jubilation among chauvinist forces in the island. While there are more than enough credible evidences to show what happened to the Eelam Tamils during this period and after – killing of civilians, mass rapes, routinization of torture, denial of medical care to the sick and the injured, to name a few – popular enthusiasm for the regime that made this possible was at its peak in the south.

And after the smoke in Vanni subsided and the diaspora began turning on the heat for an independent international investigation to probe charges of genocide, a word started entering the discourse around Sri Lanka in a big way. Reconciliation. Gotabaya talks of it. The opposition talks of it. Liberal Sinhala and Tamil activists talk of it. India and the West talk of it. NGOs talk of it. But many Tamils remain cynical of the word, three years after Mullivaikal.

The LLRC

An elaborate report tabled by experts handpicked by the Sri Lankan government called the 'Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission' waxed eloquent on measures to be taken so as to achieve unity in the island. While the report completely exonerates the government, let alone from charges of genocide, from even the liberal accusations of human rights violations, it lays the blame for the misery of the Eelam Tamils squarely on the most committed defenders of their interests, the Tigers.

Adding the necessary points on the need to address this or that grievance to give itself some credibility to observers, the report brims with enthusiasm for building a united Sri Lanka. Multi-lingual schools, bilingual anthems, pluralist approach to culture, people to people contact, and yes, mechanisms “that would effectively address and discourage secessionist tendencies and safeguard the sovereignty and integrity of the State.” Over the bones of the more than hundred thousand dead Tamils, that is.

The real message of the devisors of the LLRC seems to be that Tamils have learnt a lesson and must reconcile to the fact that they are a minority at the tender mercies of the state, not a nationality, and that there is no imagination beyond the unitary Sri Lanka. And yes, that the LTTE and its ‘secessionist’ project is a ghost of the past.

The same spirit was reflected in the recent US backed resolution in the Geneva UNHRC session, which called for a speedier implementation of the LLRC (a resolution rightly criticized by the civil society in the island, activists in Tamil Nadu and politically informed organizations in the diaspora for being grossly inadequate). Unfortunately for the international powers, GoSL and all the mechanisms it might promote through the recommendations of the LLRC, some ghosts do haunt the Sri Lankan and Eelam Tamil polities.

This was evident in the commemoration of Heroes Day in many parts of the territory of Tamil Eelam despite open threats from the occupying Sri Lankan military, and in the continuing apprehension of Rajapaksa that the Tigers may come back with their ‘secessionist’ project. But again, why retrieve the dead? Why to exorcise ghosts when they can be written away by such reports promising harmony in the future? Or, why is it that the Sri Lankan model of ‘reconciliation’ appears a joke for the Tamils?

Questioning ‘reconciliation’

The term ‘reconciliation’ originally is derived from the Christian theological concept of ending the gap between god and man, through atonement of the latter. In politics, it is a liberal concept where one socio-political group of people - which formerly was privileged in a system that worked against the detriment of another group - constitutes a series of legal and symbolic acts, mostly with assistance and participation of the affected group, with or without external mediators, so as to create political and more importantly psychological conditions to generate a social harmony that was lacking in the past. To draw an analogy from the Christian concept, let’s say, the dominant group atones for its sins against the oppressed group.

One can presume that the cynicism shown by atheists to this theological concept that material sin can be expiated through symbolic gestures will be shared by radicals towards the political concept. As the flaw with liberalism goes, the system is not radically restructured, only reformed so that certain grievances of the affected group are addressed and the psyche of the group is assuaged that some credible changes have taken place.

Case to consider: South Africa, where despite the much talked about reconciliation process and the feeling of empowerment among the Blacks post-apartheid, the vast majority of wealth is still in White hands. The effects of reconciliation, we must understand, are meant to be more psychological among the oppressed groups than material.

Nevertheless, to be fair to the liberal pundits of reconciliation theory, psychological impacts do affect material conditions to some extent. A feeling of social harmony can effect some positive political changes within a system, though these changes needn’t be the ones that the oppressed group had initially desired. Elaboration is not necessary on how illusions of the justness of a political order can maintain it.

So let us consider here the arguments of Dr. Alexander Boraine, by no means a radical, one of the main architects of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the co-founder of

International Centre for Transitional Justice. On reconciliation, he writes “At its best, reconciliation involves commitment and sacrifice; at its worst, it is an excuse for passivity, for siding with the powerful against the weak and dispossessed.” [1]

He further argues, “Unless the call for reconciliation is accompanied by acknowledgment of the past and the acceptance of responsibility, it will be dismissed as cheap rhetoric. Perhaps one of the ways in which to achieve at least a measure of reconciliation in a deeply divided society is to create a common memory that can be acknowledged by those who created and implemented the unjust system, those who fought against it, and the many more who were in the middle and claimed not to know what was happening in their country.”

Based on this, certain questions can be posed to those who argue for reconciliation between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in the island.

Will the Sinhalese, obviously the privileged group in the unitary Sri Lankan system, acknowledge that what happened in the past was not a ‘war on terror’ but the continuation of a protracted genocide of the Eelam Tamils, genocide conducted to maintain the system that structurally privileges them?

Will the Sinhalese recognize that those who fought against the genocide enforced by the Sri Lankan state apparatus through armed struggle were not terrorists but the only credible representatives of the Eelam Tamils?

Will the Sinhalese recognize that the Tamils not just have a right but also an obligation to retain the memory of both the civilians and the fighters who died in the Eelam wars and to commemorate them publicly?

These of course are only moral questions. The appropriate political question would be to ask the Sinhalese, (along with the above three, for the line between politics and morality is always blurred), whether they would push for an independent international investigation to identify and punish the perpetrators of genocide in their state and for a referendum to be conducted among the Tamils so that the Tamils can determine their future.

But are the Sinhalese in a state of mind to answer at least the three moral questions?

The Sri Lankan system and Reconciliation

At the risk of sounding cynical, one can say that apart from a few exceptions, the answers to the above questions would be in the negative. To push it further, there is a high probability that even the legitimacy of these questions will be questioned.

Why is there a general state of denial of the state of affairs in the island? Of course, in this media age, should anyone make a claim that he was not informed, one can only scoff at him. Sri Lankan society suffers from what Žižek terms ‘fetishist disavowal’ – the Sri Lankan knows what happened (genocide), but he refuses to accept the consequences of this knowledge (prosecution of offenders, a corresponding political solution), so that he can continue acting as if he didn’t know it.

Hannah Arendt points out how mendacity became a general part of the German character under the Nazis by the acceptance of effective lies. The most effective of these was the Nazi slogan “the battle of destiny for the German people”, which made self-deception easier on three counts – that there was no “war” in the proper sense of the term, that it was started by destiny and not by Germany, that the Germans need to annihilate or be annihilated, a matter of life or death.

One only needs to look at Rajapaksa’s speeches, editorials of some mainstream Sri Lankan newspapers, blogs and sites run by Sinhala ‘patriots’, the writings of some JHU leader, or even

better, the articles of certain self-proclaimed intellectuals to get the same message. The Lie that the Sri Lankan state had been spreading for ages about a global Tamil conspiracy, of Tamils as impure alien invaders, the uniqueness of the Sinhala race, the chauvinist concepts of blood, religion and soil, found acceptance as Truth by a vast majority of the Sinhalese. And this made many of them immune to any moral indignation at the obvious sufferings inflicted on the Eelam Tamils by their state.

A condition after the military defeat of the LTTE has been arrived at now. Actual subjective violence on the Tamils needn't even happen – the omnipresence of the jack-boot and the rifle butt, the panopticon of the police-military institutions and the intrusive symbols of the colonizer, besides being an open threat of direct physical violence, creates enough psychological violence against the Tamil body to keep it in a permanent state of trauma.

The argument that the absence of any major uprising in the so-called 'post-war' era signals the Tamils' acceptance of the unitary state and the success of reconciliation is as ridiculous as the one that slavery is justified when slaves don't revolt. The Sri Lankan state knows well that to crush the possibility of any mass outbreak of protest in post-Mullivaikalaal period, it needs to create such a scenario where the Tamils would be made to know, would be made to feel, that any protest against the powers would be futile and suicidal.

Can't it be otherwise in the future? Remember Col. Mathieu from The Battle of Algiers who responds to the questions of the French reporters on human right abuses in the colony with one of his own. "Should France stay in Algeria? If your answer is still yes, then you must accept all the consequences." Structural genocide and violence against the Tamils must continue as long as Sri Lanka occupies the Tamil homeland. At a further degeneration, annihilation is the solution that unitary Sri Lanka can provide, with an intensification of subjective violence on the Tamils.

With a possible betterment, assimilation is the best solution it has to offer, where the Eelam Tamils will lose all sense of identity and become 'authentic Sri Lankans' i.e. mimics of the Sinhalese. Either ways, violence on the Tamils will only shift forms in unitary Sri Lanka. But it is the latter that the Sri Lankan system desires, since it believes that it has cowed the Tamils with the possibility of the former through what it did during Mullivaikalaal. It calls this reconciliation.

Conditions for reconciliation

There are two broad conditions in which reconciliation in the island can happen.

One is a long term possibility. If we can recognize that 'reconciliation' in the current context means nothing more than the acceptance of the superiority of the Sinhalese by the Tamils and a willingness to assimilate as Sri Lankans, it can proceed successfully through a combination of factors which include intensification of Sinhala colonization/Sinhalization to make claims of a Tamil homeland impossible, neutralization of activists in Tamil Eelam, Tamil Nadu and the diaspora to accepting the unitary state as the final solution, erasure of memory of the struggle for Tamil Eelam and its symbols and so.

If this is allowed to happen, a stage will be reached - looking at trends in the island, it is likely to be within a decade if left unopposed - when the Tamils are but a scattered minority throughout the island without the possibility of a homeland of their own. At that time, maybe there will be a benevolent regime in Sri Lanka that recognizes that what happened to Tamils was a grave mistake, maybe even a genocide, for which they are genuinely sorry, and would ensure that the cultural and economic rights of the Tamil minorities are strongly safeguarded.

This would be a genuine reconciliation, with a touch of irony albeit. For it is contingent on the idea of Tamil Eelam and retributive justice for what happened over the past 60 years breaking completely among the Tamils not just in the homeland, but in Tamil Nadu and diaspora as well allowing things to reach such a stage.

The other possibility, which needs to happen soon, is for the Sinhalese en masse to answer the three questions in the affirmative, to pressurize for prosecution of war criminals from the bottom to the top in the Sri Lankan state, to press for an immediate removal of Sinhala military and colonies from the Tamil homelands, to call for a referendum to ascertain the political aspirations of the Tamils, and to ensure material reparations for the losses that the Tamil Nation suffered. Unless this sounds like an idealist pipedream, this is the only way through which reconciliation in the island can happen between the two nations. If this does not happen, 'reconciliation' is likely to join the list of swear words in Tamil.

To end, the Christian concept of reconciliation was probably the inspiration behind the proverb "to err is human, to forgive divine".

The Tamils, of course, cannot be expected to be divine considering that the other side largely tolerates a regime that was and continues to be inhuman.

Copyright © 1997-2012 TamilNet