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SRI LANKA TODAY: GOVERNMENTALITY IN CRISIS

The art of government now in vogue within the boundaries of a modern state is an *historical* as well as a *political* construction. It did not arise in a single day nor will it wither away just upon a wish. It combines both general and specific features, a combination which itself is responsible for its specificity in each and every state. On a general level, however, the art of government includes a multiplicity of tactics set to deal with problems ranging from 'how to govern' to 'how to be governed', the complexity of which has given birth to, what Michel Foucault has labelled, 'governmentality'¹. But the generality of the term ends there, for governmentality nursed in a modern 'Western' state remains qualitatively different from the one which has been nurtured in a non-Western modern state. Apart from the fact of its organic relationship with the state's society and economy, governmentality in the West had a distinctive history and a politics, which can be traced as far back as the sixteenth century beginning with the Renaissance and the Age of Reformation in Europe. The case of a non-Western modern state, however, remains sharply different.

1. For a closer understanding of the term 'governmentality', see Michel Foucault, "Governmentality", in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (ed.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies In Governmentality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87-104.

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In the case of Sri Lanka, for example, governmentality is a condition of colonial history. This fact itself separates Sri Lanka from the Western experience. But there is more to it. In the nearly 150 years of British rule, the latter succeeded in transforming the Sri Lankan society to such an extent that a certain kind of stigma, otherwise referred to as the colonial legacy, is still there to haunt the people of the island and there seems to be no respite from it in the immediate future. This has come about not merely as a result of the physical presence of the Europeans (first Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British) in the island, although it was a necessary condition, but more importantly as a result of the organization of 'colonialism proper' (a synonym for intellectual dependency of the Sri Lankans on the West) by the British.²

Colonialism proper, however, did not begin in Sri Lanka immediately upon the arrival of the British. It was only in and around 1830s and 1850s (indeed, half a century after the British has landed in the island) that schools were constructed 'to educate students on the British model',³ thereby creating for the first time conditions for the organization and reproduction of intellectual dependency of the Sri Lankans on the West. At independence, therefore, Sri Lanka had a sizeable number of intelligentsia (academicians, bureaucrats, politicians, lawyers and other functionaries), who were not only educated in 'English schools' but also were thoroughly trained in the Western discourse on administration, law, politics, economics security - that is, in the art of *modern nation-building!* Indeed, out of this physical-cum-intellectual encounter, there arose a governmentality in Sri Lanka, which was partly *colonial* (resulting from the administrative and economic structures laid down by the British) and partly colonized, resulting from the colonization of the mind.

2. For a closer exposition of the view on 'colonialism proper' or the organization of 'intellectual dependency', see Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

3. See, Rajiva Wijesinha, *Current Crisis in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1986), p.8.

Such a governmentality in Sri Lanka gave rise to the all-pervasive role of the 'government' not only in reproducing a hegemony favourable to the dominant social forces but also in building the state of Sri Lanka in the image of the modern 'Western' state. So enmeshed and dominant is its history and politics that governmentality, while remaining wholly receptive to the ideas of the West (whether those emanating from the donor or from the latter's civil society), makes such ideas conditional on them being filtered through the multiple channels of the 'government'. Put differently, Sri Lanka's civil society does not operate autonomously but seeks support of or looks forward to the 'government' in matters of both high and low concern to the country, indeed, from affairs of revenue collection to garbage collection! The result has been pathetic as well as tragic, a situation readily demonstrated by the acts of violence and misrule that is wrecking Sri Lanka apart. Here I would like to contend that it is not so much the 'government' or, for that matter, the latter's method of governing (i.e., governance) that is in crisis, but rather, and more importantly, it is governmentality itself that is in crisis, which is why the task of conflict resolution in Sri Lanka has become so difficult. I will try to make this clear in my discussion.

I will limit my exposition here to three general, albeit inter-related, areas of modern nation-building in Sri Lanka - 'politics', 'economics' and 'military', where governmentality had been critical in organizing the intellectual and the practical fields pertaining to their growth and nurturing. Such areas, in the light of their experience of being thoroughly governmentalized, are no longer in their puerile forms but represent specific 'models' of *nationhood*, *development* and *security* respectively, each model depicting a series of tactics and strategy suited to the task of organizing and reproducing the (post-colonial) state of Sri Lanka.

I. Model of Nationhood: The Making of the Nation/The Unmaking of the Society

In the light of our contention above it will not be an exaggeration to say that 'nation', 'nationalism', 'nationhood' and the like are products of a

governmentality rooted in Sri Lanka's colonial history. There is no evidence of such concepts or ideas having any relevance to the island's history prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Indeed, the very fact that the latter arrived in Sri Lanka (or, for that matter, elsewhere in the world) as 'nations' contributed to the diffusion of such ideas as propagating a 'governing principle' both for reproducing as well as for replacing colonialism, the former by way of organizing the power of the colonialists for the benefit of the 'European motherland', while the latter by way of uniting the indigenous population under the leadership or 'governorship' of the local dominant forces. Nationalism in Sri Lanka thus becomes one of the major tactics for organizing the majority of the people in the struggle against the colonial power, which due to its very mechanicality becomes source of tension and unrest for pluralist Sri Lanka. But if this was dormant and not entirely evident in the pre-1948 period, the post-independence phase of Sri Lanka showed its true colours. The 'making' of the nation soon became the 'unmaking'; of the society.

The introduction of universal suffrage in 1931 could be a good starting point to reflect on the governing principle nurtured by the local dominant forces and the dissent arising from it. K. M. de Silva, albeit from a different perspective, provides a proper account of the problematic:

. . . in the contests to the State Council, the national legislature, in 1931, candidates in most constituencies resorted to the conventional appeals to caste and religious loyalties, apart from other parochial considerations which a largely illiterate and unorganized electorate . . . *could most readily understand and respond to*. With the introduction of universal suffrage, the Buddhists came into their own. The great majority of the Sinhalese candidates were Buddhists or claimed to be Buddhists because it was now advantageous to do so (emphasis mine).⁴

It was a short journey from here when, following independence, the Senanayakes and the Bandaranaiques, albeit in different degrees, resorted to policies of attracting the majority of the electors, who were incidentally

4. K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Problems of Governance* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1993), p. 4.

Buddhist-Sinhalese, so as to win and run the government. In this quest for governorship, nationalism, now garbed in Buddhist-Sinhala idiom, became a powerful tool.

In fact, it had become the business of the government to organize the terms of reference of nationality and nation-building. So dominant was its role that by mid-1950s nation-building in Sri Lanka began to be considered solely in terms of the definition provided by the government. Indeed, in 1956, under SWRD Bandaranaike, not only was Sinhala made the sole official language of Sri Lanka but measures were also taken to support the Buddhist faith and Sinhala culture at the state level. Although the question of language has changed since then, albeit under 'violent' pressure from the Tamil community, which had forced the country to accept Tamil as one of the two official languages, the constitutional provisions for the special status for Buddhism is still there.

What is unique, however, in all these developments is that suddenly the Sri Lankans right across the island were made conscious that they are no longer just 'people' but either 'Buddhist-Sinhalese' or 'Tamil-Hindus' or 'Muslim-Tamils', etc., and the fact of being one or the other determined their fate and prospect in the island. Nationalist consciousness thus began to be constructed in a way, which, while favouring the 'Buddhist-Sinhala majority', put a burden on the latter to 'govern' and 'lead' the rest of the society, almost in a fashion resembling the psychology and the purpose of Kipling's "The White Man's Burden"!

The alienation of the non-Buddhist-Sinhalese, particularly that of the 'Hindu-Tamil minority' was, therefore, rooted in the nationalist discourse that unfolded in the island. The success of the Buddhist-Sinhala identity only undermined the interests of the Hindu-Tamils, indeed, to the extent that between 1956 and 1970 there was a drop from 30 to 5 per cent in the proportion of Tamils in the Ceylon Administrative Service, from 50 to 5 in the clerical service, 60 to 10 in the professions (engineers, doctors,

lecturers), 40 to 1 in the armed forces and 40 to 5 in the labour forces.⁵ It does not take much imagination from here to contemplate how the Hindu-Tamils would react. Indeed, the 'Tamil Tigers' arose out of a governmentality well-disposed towards the 'Buddhist-Sinhala majority', one which has been organized, nurtured and meticulously followed in post-independence Sri Lanka. Under such orchestrated circumstances, the 'unmaking' of the society could hardly be stopped.

Things have become even more difficult in the light of the fact that governmentality also restricted the civil society in having an autonomous role in the organization of the (Sri Lankan) nation. In fact, the 'sub-nationalities' themselves (whether Buddhist-Sinhalese or Hindu-Tamils) came to be artificially constructed, and things that are 'inorganic' cannot just be made 'organic'! Indeed, a full generation has come up in post independence Sri Lanka bred on the animosity and mutual hatred of their rival sub-national communities. In this context, whatever role the civil society now has in the making of the (Sri Lankan) nation remains not only passive in relation to the role of the government but also fragmented on communal lines. It is, therefore, no longer solely a matter of correct reforms and tactics, summed up as 'efficient governing', which ought to be pursued, but rather a complete and radical change of perspective is required for a meaningful resolution of the 'unmaking' of the Sri Lankan society. I will have more to say about this later.

But before I end up this section, a word or two on the struggle of the Sri Lankan Tamils for *Eelam*. While their struggle may be justified on the account of being dominated by an hegemony closely linked to the 'Buddhist-Sinhala majority', the irony of it is that they themselves, or at least a sizeable section of them, have chosen the very path against which they are struggling, namely nationalism and modern nation-building. And here, I think, lies the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the Sri Lankan Tamil activists. Indeed, now, nothing short of innovation could save the people of the island!

5. This was calculated by a trade union of Tamil Government servants, the *Arasanga Eluthu Vinaya Sangam*. For a closer exposition, see Walter Schwarz, *The Tamils of Sri Lanka*, Report No. 25 (London: The Minority Rights Group, 1988), p. 10.

II. Model of Development : Governmental Economy, Populism and Dissent

Governmentality, however, had far reaching influence in organizing the area of 'economics' in Sri Lanka, which, indeed, by the time of its independence, had settled for a model of development centered on the all-pervasive role of the government. It is important to make a distinction here between what the word 'economy' meant in the West and what it had come to mean in Sri Lanka. Suffice to point out here that in the West the word 'economy' originally meant the art of managing a household or 'the government of the family', which only in the sixteenth century had been elevated to the state level, suggesting that 'the meticulous attention of the father towards his family be introduced into the management of the state'.⁶ The sense of voluntarism in managing or governing things is still there in the West, one which is well expressed by the term 'economic government'.⁷

In Sri Lanka, the case was quite different. By the time of independence, government intervention in the area of 'economics' had already reached a stage where it could be best summed up, in contrast to the 'economic government' of the West, as *governmental economy*, referring to the all-pervasive role of the government in organizing and reproducing the area of 'economics', indeed, to the point of constructing a model of development for the state. For such model of development to sustain, however, certain specific tactics were required, which, at times, included elements as diverse as intellectual intrusion and populism. One such case, for instance, is related to the development of the public school system in Sri Lanka, which, although a product of good intention and, as far as raising the percentage of mass literacy is concerned, a success story to be proud of, remained critical in organizing and reproducing the model of development suited to the hegemonic forces of post-colonial Sri Lanka. A closer exposition will make this clear.

6. For a closer exposition of the transformation of the word 'economy', see Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

7. This has been well highlighted by Foucault. See, *ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

While the noble effort of establishing government schools began during the colonial rule, its massive expansion took place after independence. According to one source, in 1950 there were 3,188 (or 51%) and 3,058 (or 49%) government and private schools respectively, but by 1980 that figure drastically changed to 9,072 (or 99%) and 46 (or 1%) government and private schools respectively.⁸ If anything, it clearly showed the sheer power of the government in schooling the population, one which contributed to the growth and nurturing of a precise *developmentality* of the state, i.e. a mentality where 'development' is primarily geared towards the needs and aspirations of the 'majority' of the people.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind here that in Sri Lanka the role of government in education was never restricted to financing the schools only, it went much beyond that. G. H. Peiris gives a good account of this:

The increase of government control over general education is exemplified by certain crucial developments in the system of public examinations . . . The examinations are based on standard syllabuses formulated by the Ministry of Education; and, the preparation of students for them has come to be based increasingly on course-guides and text books, also prepared by the Ministry. A further extension of this process witnessed in the past few years in that the Ministry of Education (through its Regional Directorate) has taken over the function of setting the question papers for annual school examinations at post-primary grades. Thus it is seen that a *government control extends even to the content of knowledge* imparted by the schools (emphasis mine).⁹

Indeed, in view of the role of the 'popularly-elected government' in education nationally, such governmentalization of knowledge not only limits competition and creativity, which otherwise could be found in autonomous and independent schooling, but also caters to Buddhist-Sinhala populism bent on organizing the *developmentality* of the state that has been referred to earlier. While the former undermines, as some critics have already pointed out, 'the quality of education',¹⁰ the latter invites dissent from amongst the

8. Cf. from K. M. de Silva, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

9. See, G. H. Peiris, "Government and Social Welfare", in K. M. de Silva, *ibid.*, pp. 197-8.

10. *ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

non-Buddhist-Sinhala minority. If the second issue creates conditions for civil conflicts, particularly those between 'Buddhist-Sinhala majority' and 'Hindu-Tamil minority', the first issue, I believe, remains an obstacle to the nurturing of innovative ideas towards resolving such conflicts. But that is not all.

A quick glance at Sri Lanka's economic history will show that the developmentality of the state found its best and boldest expression in the island's adoption of 'socialism'. K. M. de Silva in his observation gives an indication of that:

Since plantation enterprise, nascent industry and the island's trade were dominated by foreign capitalists, and the minorities were seen to be disproportionately influential within the indigenous capitalist class, Buddhist pressure groups viewed '*socialism*' as a means of redressing the balance in favour of the majority group. Every extension of state control over trade and industry . . . could be, and was, justified on the ground that it helped curtail the influence of foreigners and the minorities . . . (emphasis mine).¹¹

Indeed, in each and every sphere of the economy where state control was introduced to spread 'socialism' and 'develop' the country, whether in the area of employment generation or manufacturing industry or transportation or trade, etc., it practically ended up strengthening and reproducing the geopolitical space and the power base of the Buddhist-Sinhala majority. Development in Sri Lanka, therefore, has come to stand not as a national feature encompassing the entire society, but something that is limited to the task of fulfilling the goals and aspirations of the 'majority' community.

One must not take this situation to be limited to the Bandaranaike's period of 'socialist' governorship [1956-1967; 1970-1977], rather it covers, albeit with certain modifications in the means, the entire range of developmental activities of post-independence period. Even Jayewardene's and later Premadasa's so-called shift towards a 'free market economy' did not imply a reversal of the developmentality the two had inherited, rather it only reflected the power and the maturity of the majority community to sustain

11. *ibid.*, p. 18.

and reproduce itself without the direct sponsorship of the state. Governmentality had so conditioned the model of development in the island that it now remains meaningful only in relation to a populist paradigm (expressed sometimes in the language of 'socialism', at times 'open economy', sometimes 'poverty alleviation', and so on) suited to reproduce the hegemony favourable to the 'Buddhist-Sinhala majority'. In such a situation, it is a far cry to redress the civil conflicts in the island through 'development'.

III. Model of Security: The Militarization of the Society and the Decivilisation of Conflict Resolution

In contrast to the other two areas of modern nation-building, governmentality had a totalizing influence in organizing the area of 'military' in Sri Lanka. This is true not only with respect to the organization and development of the military as an institution but also, and more importantly, with regard to the question of organizing and defining the *security problematic* of the country. The two, however, are correlated, out of which, in fact, there developed a model of security essentially geared towards the task of organizing and reproducing a hegemony favourable to the dominant social forces. Such a model of security not only alienated the 'minorities' but also militarized the society with critical consequences to the task of conflict resolution in the island. I will try to explain this in some details.

The military as a proper institution came into being in Sri Lanka after independence in 1949, when the Sri Lankan army was established to protect the country's new-found sovereignty and statehood. This does not mean that Sri Lanka under the British did not have a military with natives serving in it, rather it had a small one, consisting mainly of volunteers. When a full-timed standing army was established most of these volunteers were recommissioned, which proved somewhat out of tune with the state of affairs then prevailing in the country as the bulk of the members belonging to the officer corps - three-fifths of them - were recruited from the minority

communities (Tamils, Burghers and Christians).¹² While such a situation of over-representation of the minorities arose out of Britain's earlier policy of divide and rule in the island, to which the new-born country fell victim, the fact remains that the first commanders of the Sri Lankan military were seconded British officers as part of the defense agreement signed between Sri Lanka and Britain on the eve of Sri Lanka's independence. It was, therefore, not unnatural that a measure of continuity will be emphasized in the defense establishment. It is now quite clear, however, that this was only a makeshift arrangement, which the popularly-elected government sought to 'correct' on the first opportunity.

It did not take long to correct this. In fact, in less than a decade, government intervention helped to swing the balance in favour of the Buddhist-Sinhalese; indeed, to the extent that by late 1950s the latter began to be 'over-represented'.¹³ This is best reflected in the number of Sri Lankan cadets sent to Sandhurst. Between 1957 and 1959, 72% of the Sri Lankan cadets were Sinhalese, while in 1960 every single Sri Lankan cadet sent to Sandhurst turned out to be a Sinhalese.¹⁴ It was becoming evident that the post-independence recomposition of the military only reflected the extent to which governmentality had conditioned the organization and development of the military. In fact, not only was the military increasingly becoming 'manned' by the majority community but, more interestingly, the majority community itself was becoming the 'purpose' for the organization and development of the military. As a result, *national security* had become a thing of the majority, nurtured, organized and defined by the government.

It has otherwise rightly been pointed out that the Sri Lankan army is 'an internal security force'.¹⁵ In fact, modern Sri Lanka never fought a foreign power. On the contrary, it sought outside help to contain civil unrest inside the country. Indeed, in 1971 during the JVP insurgency and

12. *ibid.*, p. 351.

13. *ibid.*, p. 352.

14. *ibid.*, p. 353.

15. *ibid.*, p. 354.

again in 1987 following the Indo-Lankan Agreement, when hegemony favourable to the dominant social forces was critically threatened, the incumbent government sought military help from outside powers, mainly India. Although the final outcome in each of these two cases greatly differed, the success of the military in putting down the JVP insurgency in 1971 practically led to the decivilisation of conflict resolution in the island. And it is this factor, more than anything else now, that stands as the immediate obstacle to the task of finding fresh and innovative means towards resolving civil conflict in northern Sri Lanka. The reasons are not difficult to understand.

The success of the military against the JVP in 1971 created a 'model' of conflict resolution in the sense that, *violent military measures* are now regarded as 'useful', 'efficient' and 'practical' in resolving political conflicts or civil unrest in the country. While the presence of a military (whose primary task nonetheless is to deter external aggression) provided an institutional as well as a legal basis for the use of force at home, the success in routing out the JVP menace created grounds for its massive use against the Tamil militants. Few here, however, realized that the success story of the military vis-a-vis the JVP (both of which incidentally are within the domain of the 'majority community') could not just be replicated in the north. In fact, up until now the government-led military operations in the north only helped the militants, particularly the Tamil Tigers, to consolidate their position among the 'minority' Tamil population.¹⁶

There is, however, a far more critical dimension to the recurrent use of the military in Sri Lanka. The more the military becomes essential to the task of conflict resolution the more the art of government becomes paralysed, leading to further militarization of the society. This is, indeed, a paradox. Here governmentality itself has created a structure which tends to

16. For a closer exposition of this issue, see Imtiaz Ahmed, "State and Military in South Asia: The Pitfalls of Modernity," paper presented at the International Conference on "South Asia's Security in the 1990s: Primacy of the Internal Dimension", organized by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka, 6 January 1992.

limit the role of the government. Indeed, the art of government, if it is to remain civil and innovative, requires *freedom*. It cannot just spread and develop in an environment of regimentation. It is, therefore, no surprise that in the midst of an increased use of the military, the government is time and again failing to nurture a lasting solution to the civil conflict in the island. If civil unrest is to be contained in Sri Lanka, the much abused notion of 'national security' needs to be replaced by a more sober and practical notion of *societal security*. This would, of course, require a total restructuring of the current mode of thinking on security.

Conclusion : Towards an Alternative Discourse

The idea is precisely to advocate an alternative discourse that is wholly practical and relevant to the people of Sri Lanka. But the thing that must be made clear at the outset lest it distorts the purpose and that is, no amount of government intervention will do. The best the government can do, or rather ought to do for the sake of organizing a culture of free-thinking, is to undertake a policy of *governmental withdrawal* from matters which are intellectual. But then where does one begin? This is, indeed, a difficult question to which there is no easy answer. But since it is governmentality which needs to be transformed, it will be wise to start from the very place where it all began - a child's schooling!

The three areas of modern nation-building that have been touched in this paper - 'politics', 'economics' and 'military' - are also three areas that are glorified and sacredly tutored in the schools and Universities of Sri Lanka. This is done not simply by the members of the majority community who enjoy an advantage over the minorities in the field of employment in the educational sector but rather, and more critically, by the things that are taught for the purpose of education, that is, the ones making up the *curriculum*.

There are two critical features in the over-all organization of the curriculum, from primary to higher levels of education. One is its biasness towards the *history* of the majority community that is best reflected in the

glorification of the 'nation', 'nationalism' and 'nationhood', while the other feature, which is equally dominant, is its free-borrowing from the knowledge-house of the West. If the former contributes to the reproduction of hegemony favourable to the dominant social forces, the latter organizes a Sri Lankan mind towards building the state in the image of the modern 'Western' state. Understandably, both the features invite conflicts, of varying nature and degrees, which are often difficult to contain.

In this respect, there is little that the governmentalized schools and Universities can do. Indeed, in certain cases it has reached a pathetic level where, for example, a newly recruited faculty member of the University, even with an Oxon Ph.D, is required to sit for the language proficiency test in advanced Sinhalese for her to be confirmed in the job. Moreover, the system of centralized examination hardly makes sense when one student is tutored in the capital city of Colombo with all the 'reading' and 'thinking' facilities (libraries, seminars, media, etc.), while the other in a rural area having to write her examination depending on text books and 'low quality' teaching. The way out, of course, is to *decentralize* the examination system with radical transformation in the curriculum, that is, making the latter relevant and practical to the *place* of schooling. At the same time, without having to go via the Ministry seated in Colombo, a school in a remote village in southern Sri Lanka, for example, ought to have all the freedom to exchange ideas and materials with schools in Barisal (Bangladesh) or elsewhere in the world. Indeed, governmentality, if it is to be transformed, must be challenged with activities based on minimum *trust* that each and every person in Sri Lanka is capable to judge what is best for her/his immediate homestead and upbringing.

It is otherwise not very difficult to see that what the alternative discourse intends to achieve is the empowerment of the civil society. This must be understood, however, not in the Western sense of the term with its strong emphasis on urbanity,¹⁷ but rather in the sense put forward by Tagore

17. See, Boris Ford, (ed.), *The Age of Shakespeare* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 19-20.

highlighting the dichotomy between *rashtra* (state) and *puroshamaj* (civil society).¹⁸ Essentially, it calls for a bottom-up approach, empowering the *localities* with power fizzling out at the top. This is a condition, however, which requires immense innovations in fields as diverse as education, military, electoral system, economics, transportation, administration of things and so on.

18. For a closer exposition of Tagore's views, see Satyendranath Roy (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat: Swadesh Chinta* (Calcutta: Gronthaloy Pvt. Ltd., 1988).