

A New Country?

(Remarks by Nirupama Rao on the occasion of the release of “Sri Lanka, a New Country” by Padma Rao Sundarji, New Delhi, April 12, 2015)

A fortnight ago to be exact, I went back to Sri Lanka. Went back, because over the last thirty four years, I have had more than one occasion to live and work in that country, traverse its length and breadth, and get to know its wonderful people, from different ethnicities and religious backgrounds. I have felt very much at home in Sri Lanka since the island country reminds me so much of my native state of Kerala in many, myriad ways.

So on my latest visit, for the first time, I went to Sri Lanka not on official work, but, since I am now retired, merely as a private citizen, to spend time with friends and witness at first hand, the many changes in its capital city of Colombo which looked much brighter and cleaner with its broad pavements for pedestrians, many walkways and lush parks, and beautifully restored heritage buildings. The Galle Face Green, that huge *maidan* in the heart of Colombo thronged with people, men, women and children, enjoying the evening sea breeze and savoring the street food sold by vendors along the shore. This was a peace-time city, and the faces of the people I met betrayed no trace of the tension and stress that one often saw during the twenty six year civil war that had robbed so many of their lives and livelihoods between 1983 and 2009. Business and tourism as I saw was thriving, and the Indian tourists who had never stopped coming even during the war years, are back in solid numbers. Of course, I also saw many, many more Chinese tourists, young and old at the airport at Katunayake, and in the streets and shops of Colombo than I had ever seen in the past. Their numbers had grown exponentially, in a manner one could not have foreseen even four years ago. There are now direct flights between Chengdu, in Sichuan Province of China and Colombo. And, the expressway I traveled on from the airport to the city was a gleaming new road constructed by the Chinese. The Chinese have discovered the geography of Sri Lanka, and it is no longer a quest for tea and cinnamon, or the example of the intrepid, ancient mariner, Zheng He that propels them, but investment in the geo-strategic position of the island as a gateway to the Indian Ocean.

Was this a new country I had come back to? I asked myself this question since around the time of my recent trip, I was also asked by my friend, Padma Rao Sundarji, to come to New Delhi for the release ceremony of her book entitled “Sri Lanka, The New Country”.

Being deeply interested in Sri Lanka for the most part of my adult life, I was drawn immediately to Padma’s book. I read it from cover to cover, fascinated by its delineation of a post-war Sri Lanka, its countryside, its towns, and its description of the feel, the texture of the life of its people, both Sinhalese and Tamil, high ranking and ordinary, speaking in authentic voices about their hopes and aspirations for themselves in their country. A ‘new’ country : for this was not the war-torn, scorched earth nation of the civil war with its deliverance of death and destruction, but a country where the guns had fallen silent and the water lilies were blooming. Serendib had found itself.

Or, had it? I began to ponder over what this newness really meant. Was it just that war had ended and peace had begun; was it that the people on both sides of the ethnic divide had forgotten and forgiven, that they had come to terms with their tragic past, the past involving almost three decades of war, sons and daughters lost forever, homes and schools destroyed, and graveyards multiplying? Could these people recall times of joy? Times before the war, or was it only the fog and darkness they recalled, of those lost decades when war was fought and ate up the entrails of this beautiful country?

In Padma's book I was particularly struck by what an old Tamil man in Jaffna told her: "We need *samadhanam* (that is, peace) to last". It was a plaintive and emotional plea; and it struck an immediate chord. Why was there a doubt in the mind of that old man who had seen and experienced so much? Had peace distributed its gifts, and wiped every tear? Had this ethnically segmented country become truly one again?

On the surface, for all intents and purposes, it has. The road to the ancient city of Jaffna is open, the Yarl Devi – the train between Colombo and Jaffna is running, the refugee camps have emptied out, there are housing developments, and schools and universities in the North of the country are functioning normally. Hotels have opened, home stays are available, and people are picking up the threads of their disrupted lives. Tamils they say, predominate the population of Colombo.

I made a trip to Jaffna in 2010, for the opening of our Consulate General in Jaffna. It was an official trip and as part of my schedule I attended a meeting with faculty and students in the University of Jaffna. What struck me was a question I was asked by a senior Sri Lankan Tamil professor, about India and its role in the unfolding of the history of the civil war, particularly the experience of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. The questioner could not conceal the hostility in his tone. The message was that India had done little to help the Tamil people of Jaffna in their time of utter distress and abandonment. To my mind, the question mirrored the sense of alienation, the numbness of a people that had seen so much that they could no longer guess their future, not knowing where and how they would end, to quote the Kashmiri poet, Agha Shahid Ali. The old map of Ceylon, of Sri Lanka, of Serendib did not exist in these minds – that place had been taken by wretchedness, with nothing to forgive, nothing to forget. That is not how it should be.

Every nation, as Ernest Renan said, "is a community both of shared memory and shared forgetting". So, between former enemies on either side of that artificial divide between two linguistic communities in Sri Lanka, can there be 'a blessed act of oblivion', to quote Churchill, so that a stable and peaceful future can be ensured?

In Padma's book, some highly articulate, persuasive and well spoken Sri Lankan army officers have spoken about the last few weeks of the civil war and how events transpired as the LTTE was on its last leg. In those desperate, fight-to-the-finish last days, there can be little doubt that helpless civilians became human shields and cannon fodder. This is a story that is repeated war after war, country after country. The list of missing persons has not gone away, it will not be buried. The dead cannot speak but the living seek answers.

That is the tragedy of the Tamil people of Sri Lanka. In saying so, I do not in any belittle the immense, courageous sacrifice of thousands of Sinhalese youth who joined the Sri Lankan army to fight the forces of separatism. The war memorial in Colombo, with its polished granite walls, lists them name for name, and is an anthem for their doomed youth.

The attainment of truth and reconciliation after a time of conflict can happen, as we saw in South Africa. Nelson Mandela as has been often said, was the embodiment of truth and reconciliation. In the words of one learned observer, from the day of his release from Robben Island, he ‘focused on the need to come to terms with the past, but always with a readiness to forgive and to move on’. South Africa was able to bring former enemies together to the table to negotiate a new Constitution and consolidate democracy and a human rights culture. Sri Lanka has what it takes to achieve similar goals. It has a strong civil society, strong democratic foundations, it has sterling men and women of conscience, a vibrant media culture, and a tradition of informed debate.

The punishment of violators of human rights is a complex and painful task with no easy solutions. This is especially so when the unity of a country is involved, for outcomes that will create divisions among the people involved on both sides of the ethnic classification can be most dangerous. How wide can the net of punishment, as some call it, be cast? When a nation is freed of terror, how do we deal with the tough reality of healing the wounds of those who have suffered, caught in the cross-fire from both sides? Myths and half-truths cannot suffice – the victims and the perpetrators both have to give account so that we see the silence broken and memory and humanity restored. What happened in the past should never happen in the future. But for that to be a possibility, there should not just be knowledge of what happened, but acknowledgement of any wrongs done, so that human dignity, particularly of the civilians who perished, is reaffirmed and becomes a part of the healing. That is what becoming a ‘new country’ means to me.

Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka took on a self-destructive cast with the emergence of the LTTE. The latter capitalized on what it called the sense of “*throgam*” or betrayal and used this to create a sub-culture of terror and violence projected on what it called the practice of “*veeram*” or bravery. What was the demand of the Tamil parties thus evolved from federalism to secession expressed through the LTTE ideology. Tamil nationalist rhetoric and Sinhala exclusivism fed on each other, as my late friend, Kethesh Loganathan said, with growing intolerance. The morality of politics, emphasizing the concept of a righteous ruler was lost at the Centre. Insecurity and identity crises reinforced each other. That tragedy can ill afford repetition.

Reconciliation in Sri Lanka cannot just mean the building of bridges at a people-to-people level between the two communities. It has to involve soul-searching dialogue between the victims of violence and the State itself because ultimately it is the State that has to be seen as Protector, as Upholder of basic human rights, as the preserver of the identities of the various communities it encompasses. The devolving of power to various regions, granting collective rights to these communities, so that the State is seen as the ultimate arbiter of truth, fairness and justice, so that old and young in the war-torn regions of the country can say they owe unquestionable allegiance to their government because they have faith in the

legitimacy of that state as their protector is most desirable. This coupling of political reform to address the demands that formed the basis of what was once called the national question by the Tamil parties, much before militancy hijacked the movement, together with a catharsis of genuine truth-telling leading to reconciliation, is a goal that can ensure that the nightmares of the past are never repeated and the forces of terror and violence cannot be reincarnated in Sri Lanka.

There is another point I wish to make. Michael Ignatieff, the Canadian academic once spoke in Colombo at a lecture commemorating the slain Neelan Tiruchelvam who died at the hands of the LTTE, that expatriate communities make 'the problem of their home societies worse'. Absence does not remove responsibility, he said. Those expatriates in the Sri Lankan Tamil community who espouse extremism and secession do not pay the consequences for their positions. It is the ordinary civilian in the North and the East of the country that was sacrificed and had to pay with his or her life as a result. Views cannot be frozen in the nineteen eighties. It was Neelan who said that if you fight fire with fire you burn your house down. And, if you burn your house down, you have nothing left. A Tamil cannot be called a traitor if he or she engages in dialogue, in political compromise, and he or she has the right to question violence committed in their name from either side. There is no military solution to any problem. The war has ended today, but enduring peace can come not through the deployment of men in uniform, but through the instruments of democracy, and popular consent. It is together that Tamils and Sinhalese can avoid Armageddon. There is a powerful concluding line in Padma's book where she expresses the hope that "the new, united country is never again torn apart by the fissures of the old".

India is Sri Lanka's only neighbor. It should be impossible, as Gandhiji said long ago, for us to quarrel. Mutual sensitivity to each other's concerns is an imperative if we are to attain that quality of a relationship marked by irreducible excellence as the late Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, whose birthday it is today, used to say. India's geostrategic and security interests concerning Sri Lanka, given the proximity of that island country to our southern shores, are a given. Governments in Sri Lanka are well aware of and well tuned into this reality. The recent developments concerning the Colombo Port City development and the appearance of military submarines in the Port, involving another country have engendered a number of valid questions as to whether India's sensitivities were kept in mind or, consciously flouted.

It is of course undeniable that our systems work differently from China's and our pace of implementation of our projects and assistance schemes could do with significant acceleration. The latter are prone to unfortunate delays although sometimes they do get stuck for no fault of India's, as in the case of the NTPC power plant project at Sampur, near Trincomalee. And what is not acknowledged is that our projects generate Sri Lankan jobs, we do not import labor into Sri Lanka whereas one comes across frequent reports of the numbers of Chinese laborers in the country today. I read somewhere that villagers in southern Sri Lanka are doing a thriving business growing Chinese vegetables that they sell to these workers who stay for months on projects their country is executing all over the country!

Deep down in every Indian heart, there is the hope that Sri Lanka, the country that has had such a grip on our national imagination since the time of the Ramayana, remains at peace with itself, freed of the demons of war and destruction. Sri Lankan Buddhists and Hindus dream of India as the sacred abode of their religious belief, and that bond can never be broken. And, Padma's book with its eloquent and fine-tuned descriptions of the beauty of the North and East of the island should encourage exploration, understanding and comprehension of a country that has emerged from a long night into a new dawn where peace is no longer a dream. It is a book I highly recommend to every discerning reader.
