

## **So whose nation is this anyway?**

**By Malinda Seneviratne, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2007**

I am not conversant enough in literature to assess the worth of the recently held Galle Literary Festival. I was there only on the final two days anyway and then only for two or three sessions. I don't know to what extent the so-called 'best minds in the country' deliberated on the politics of the word or if they did so at all, but the organizers, bless them (!), did throw in the 'political' on the last day.

It may have been an afterthought and it did seem a bit out of place since apart from David Blacker, the others on a panel titled 'What makes Sri Lanka one?' are certainly not people who have made their mark in 'literature'. It was predictably a non-literary kind of political discussion that ensued. It was one-sided and I couldn't help thinking that the panelists were hand-picked to give an audience that had a considerable number of foreigners a particular slant of story, history and utopia.

Let's get the format out of the way. Four men and one woman. Introductory remarks by Dominick John Chilcott, British High Commissioner. Tissa Jayatillake, moderator of the panel, then set up a frame for the discussion. The panelists did their number in the following order: Shanthaseelan Kadirgamar, David Blacker, Kumudini Samuel and Rohan Edirisinghe. And finally the usual Q&A session.

Chilcott started by saying that the British didn't play the divide-and-rule game in Sri Lanka, but did the opposite, 'unified for administrative convenience'. Subtext: 'we united two disparate political entities, Sinhala and Tamil. This man, who obviously is ignorant of history, went on to plead that the A-9 be re-opened. He clearly chose to forget how Britain reacted to the bomb threat at Heathrow a few months before, when his government imposed the strictest ever security measures. He ought to have known that 'degree of threat' is part and parcel of political discourse, that terrorism demands that special mechanisms to counter it be instituted and that civil liberties naturally suffer. He didn't say anything about the silence of his government during the 10 years that the LTTE closed the A-9, and nothing of the extortion, arms-smuggling etc that the LTTE used the A-9 for. He didn't mention the fact that the LTTE refused to let humanitarian aid pass through the areas under their control.

Tissa Jayatillake, as moderator, played the centre. He didn't take sides, but laid out the issues, the contentions and of course mapped out the contours of human concerns. He forgot to mention that society, just as it is divided on lines of ethnicity and religious faith, is also fractured along a fault line called class. But then again, 'class' is no longer sexy and indeed when that particular dimension of exclusion, marginalization and hegemony is brought into the equation, the make-up of the ethnic and the religious quickly start to come off.

Seelan was the only person who spoke to the topic. He enumerated the symbols that unite or contain commonality. He made a sharp observation later on which we shall come back

to. Blacker was brusque and said not in so many words that this 'oneness' business was untenable. 'Do we need to be one?' he asked. That was an honest and legitimate question. We don't have to be 'one'. In fact we cannot be 'one'. That however is insufficient support for federalism. No, Blacker didn't try that line. Samuel and Edirisinghe did. Samuel, as one would expect, laid out the terminology that feeds separatism. She talked of 'majoritarianism', deftly weaving in 'unitary' references as though a unitary state is necessarily unjust, undemocratic and coercive. She talked of 'Sri Lanka' and 'Sri Lankans'. She cannot and probably does not want to talk of Sinhalese and Buddhists, but was happily affirming 'Tamil' and 'Tamilness'. Subtext: 'Sinhalese and Buddhists must be Sri Lankan; Tamils both Tamils and Sri Lankans.'

She talked about an 'obsession' with the 'unitary state'. She didn't say that a small coterie of persons, many of whom worship the West and/or Marxism, who are either Anglicised or are in awe of the Anglicised, have been obsessed with weakening the state, vilifying the Sinhalese and frequently engage in bashing Buddhists and Buddhism, have rolled these obsessions to a mother-of-all-obsessions called Federalism. She didn't say that the Federalists were ruled out by the umpire (the people). She didn't say that they were refusing to leave the crease. She didn't confess that the match was over. She didn't say that Federalism does not have any logic in resolving anything and that it is not nothing more than the whine of the defeated.

Edirisinghe embellished that flawed framework. He did the oona-pooranaya for Samuel's proposition(s). He paid respects to the 'multi-ethnic, multi-religious' methodology of dismissing numbers and history. Edirisinghe has been in the business long enough to know that words distort as much as reveal. Multi-ethnic, multi-religious' demands one vote for one ethnicity, one vote for one faith. Apply this to a country where one community makes up over 70% of the population and one faith almost 70%, and you are asking for a 'inoritarianism' that is at least as messy as the mess wrought by 'majoritarianism', as defined by these people, who, let us remember are not objective political scientists.

The panel, then, by and large forgot to say that historical grievances have to be validated by historical evidence, that 'version' is never an adequate vehicle to transport oneself from ahistorical to historical and that even if history is version, version itself must do justice to (at least) archaeological evidence. They did not say that if 'self-determination' is the quest then it is less a choice between 'unitary' and 'federal' as it is an issue about structures of governance that hold politicians accountable, ensures transparency and facilitates true participation of citizens in decision-making. They didn't say that if the historical transcripts forbid aspirations based on 'homelands', then grievances are common to all communities and the 'ethnic' articulation of grievance is nothing more than a convenient garb.

'Seelan' said something very thought-provoking. 'When a Tamil says "Federalism" he is called a terrorist,' he said. I offer two observations. When anyone says 'Federalism' he/she is most often called 'separatist' and not 'terrorist'. Anandasagaree, for example, talks federalism. He is not called 'terrorist'. It is only those who still want to see the LTTE as liberation fighters and refuse to admit that if self-determination has something to do with affirmation of the democratic principle then terrorism has to be defeated (especially since the terrorist is not interested in negotiations) who are called terrorist-backers when they say 'Federalism'.

Secondly, we must not forget that when a Sinhalese says 'Unitary', he/she is called 'racist', 'chauvinist' and is duly bad-mouthed.

Whose nation is this anyway? Does it not belong to each and every Tamil, Moor and Burgher, each and every Hindu, Muslim, Christian (of whatever denomination), just as much as it belongs to each and every Sinhalese and Buddhist? The answer is 'yes'. No, the answer is a resounding 'YES'.

However, if affirming this 'ownership of nation' involves or necessitates a concerted vilification of Sinhalese and Buddhists or arithmetic sleight of hand to cook the numbers in ways that make irrelevant the numerical strength of Sinhalese and Buddhists; if this nation is one where terrorism is confused with liberation, unethical conversion smudged with the right to practice one's religion; if this nation's cultural ethos is one where a person's social background (in particular whether he speaks/'elocutes' English well) is the criterion that confers degree of intelligence or potential; if this nation glosses over the legal theft of value perpetrated by the rich and scoffs at the working class when it agitates for being 'spoilers'; if this nation refuses to acknowledge that mandates have values or dubs positions that have been endorsed in elections as 'extreme' and 'extremist'; indeed if this nation operates as though 'nation' is a forbidden word; then there's something ridiculously wrong with the articulation. That nation is a falsehood and insult to intellectual integrity.

A nation that belongs to all equally requires the space to affirm all cultural identities. Such a nation should be an entity where the rules of government are clear and make for efficiency and integrity. In that nation the citizen would be a stake-holder and not someone who acquires value come election time and is divested of voice thereafter. The tragedy of this nation is that not only is there resident in it a vocal, moneyed and subversive minority engage in history-erasure and anti-intellectual fantasizing a la Federalism, it shies from a discourse on the governance structures that allow citizen to be citizen and forces politician to be servant. Yes, one doesn't have to go all the way to Galle to figure all this.