_____

CHRONICLE AND CONFLICT: RE-READING SRI LANKAN CHRONICLES IN UNDERSTANDING THE CIVIL WAR.

_____

Rincy Saji
DoctoralCandidate
School of Letters
Mahatma Gandhi University,Kottayam, Kerala, India 686560.
_____

Abstract:

The persistent ethnic conflict and violence in Sri Lanka have attained the world's attention. Even after gaining independence from British Rule, the land still continues its journey in the murkiness of conflicts and violence. Sri Lanka is not only a paradigm of ethnic conflict between the dominant Sinhalese and minority groups like the Tamils or Muslims, but also integrates the broad spectrum of religion, culture, linguistic, and class. Given the multifarious nature and complexities of this conflict, the prominent role of Linguistic and Literature in this war is preeminent. Moreover, it is through the historiography of the land that we understand the cultural-religious construct of a nation. This paper lays out the impact of the chronicles such as *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* in constructing the disputed notion of the dominant Sinhalese and Tamil minority. How the Sinhala majority, which centralizes the construction of the state and the nation, interpreted these texts and used them as a tool of political propaganda to dominate the nation.This kind of misreading of the chronicles manifested a minority complex in the psyche of the Tamil minority or the Muslims to have felt marginalized both culturally and politically. Consequently, they began to respond with non-violent and violent measures to re-invent their cultural identities.The article analyses how these misinterpretations of these literatures affect ethnic differences across all areas of the nation such as education, culture and politics with traumatizing consequences.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, literature, ethnic conflict, violence, trauma

From its centuries-old history, Sri Lanka has been a diverse nation in respect of religion, culture, ethnicity, and linguistic. The nation has operationally involved the co-existence of ethnicities significantly two main groups; the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Even though the country entered its period of political independence from British rule in 1948, and later into the status of the Republic in 1972, the island was never emancipated from conflicts and violence. Post-independence the ethnicity and violence have taken multi-dimensional phases such as politicization of ethnic difference, permissive violence on the

_____

island, demand for a separate state on the basis of ethnicity, attacking the cultural significance of the Tamil minority, and sabotaging cultural heritage of the minorities. Being the numerically dominant ethnicity Sinhalese took over the state buildings and centralized the nation in ethnic difference. These factors, among others invoked the minority community to take up arms and retaliate to reinvent their lost identity and liberty. Since the state buildings riddled with paradoxes, hegemonic politics of the land manifested a minority complex in all areas in which the minorities felt marginalized and demanded a separate state. This retaliation ended in the bloodbath of both ethnicities involved, thousands and thousands of children were killed and maimed, many women were brutally raped and many people murdered. Gordon Weiss in the preface to his book *The Cage*, which is an account of Sri Lanka ethnic conflict, argues that "the government rejected international calls for an investigation into the conduct of war"(10). Even though the state buildings tried to obscure reports from the outside world, in many ways, this widely spread ethnic animosity and violence are apparently portrayed in Sri Lankan Literatures. The geneses of these antagonisms were already written in the historiography of the land. And paradoxically, it was also written down in the Sri Lankan constitution post-independence. This paper analyses the root cause of the tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils through Sri Lankan Literatures.

Among various kinds of literatures, it is the chronicles or the historiography of the island that people often heed to understand the historical events. Paul Cobley in his book *Narrative*fundamentally expands on the connection between narrative and history where he mentions historic records as, "itself a discursive entity made up of signs means that it offers a re-presented, thoroughly selective account of what actually happened"(29). These chronicles record the authentic history of Sri Lanka, which the people ferret out to legitimize their clan and superiority over others. The two epic narratives, *Dīpavaṁsa* and *Mahavamsa* its own purpose produce a form of new and distinctive knowledge about society. As Gordon Weiss defines these two texts in his book, the chronicle *Dipavamsa* as written anonymously as a "tale woven in mnemonics verses, ancient Pali texts, and Sinhala commentaries" While the *Mahavamsa* was written by Mahanama "is cited as literal evidence for the Sinhalese claim to the whole island" (Weiss, 15). These narratives are written in the Pali language, which is the scholarly Buddhist language, mentioning the chronological history of Sinhalese kingdoms. These kinds of literature not only account for its depiction of the life of that period, but also reflect the judgmental behaviour of the author about the society then. Peter Munz in his study postulates the reason why people often tend to revert to historiography to understand one's identity and sense of community as:

At one end of the scale there is idle curiosity and the fascination of the exotic; in the middle, there has always been the desire to learn from other people's experiences; and at the other end there is the assumption that one's past defines one's identity and

_____

that the perception, even though it may be spurious or imagined, of a shared past promotes a sense of community. (833)

Post-independence the state buildings and nation dominated by the Sinhalese who were perpetrating violence in sophisticated manners to deprive the minority of their political rights and culture. There are innumerable factors that possibly amplified ethnic differences were such as historic antecedents, religion, linguistics, ancestral territory, and cultural attributes. This paper devotes itself to vet the impact of Sri Lankan Historiographies in constructing the socio-political-cultural framework of the nation. Chronicles such as *Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa*, and *Culavamsa* depict the history of the land which, in modern Sri Lanka, is considered as the authentic history of the island. These historic texts' pre-eminent role in constructing the framework elucidates its status among other Literature. Even though the subject of literature is infinite and various from one text to another, the narrative and the theme often reflect situations in the real world itself. These subjects are either derived from a myriad of sources such as myth, history, or the writer's imagination. But rather than comprehending these historical texts, they procure multiple dimensions in time. This is expounded in Wolfgang Iser's manuscript *The Range of Interpretation* that such authority of the texts "is bound to gain new dimensions that did not exist when it was sealed" (14). This enmeshed relationship between literature and society has provided so much momentum for the artist to depict the socio-political setting of the nation in their works.

Several factors amplify the ethnic difference in the island one among them being Religion. The Sinhalese and the Tamils trace their religion to Buddhism and Hinduism respectively under the purview of these Chronicles. During the years of conflict Sinhalese state apparatus used the iconography of Buddhism to legitimate the fighting. According to the chronicle *Mahavamsa*the first advent of the Aryan settlers on the island was led by Prince Vijaya along with his 700 men landing on the same day Gautama Buddha attained *nibbana* (died). *Dipavamsa* also mentions this advent of Prince Vijaya to establish Buddhism on the island as, "I will set forth the history of Buddha's coming to the Island, of the arrival of the relic and of the Bo (branch), of the doctrine of the teachers who made the recensions (of Dhamma and Vinaya), of the propagation of the Faith in the Island, of the arrival of the chief of men (Vijaya); listen"(14). This episode succinctly accounts for depicting Buddhist Sinhalese as the protector of Sri Lanka. It could be argued that post-independence, to further the hegemonic position of Sinhalese extremists; they carried out reforms to make Buddhism their national religion. It is paradoxical that Buddhism being the national religion, which is considered as a passive religion with principles of Ahimsa, Sri Lanka was in the murkiness of mayhem.Chelavadurai Manogaran in his study *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* argues, "The *bhikkhus* (Buddhist monastic)who compiled the *Mahavamsa* attached religious significance to this episode as an indication that the Sinhalese people, ..., are destined by divine will to protect and foster Buddhism in Sri

_____

Lanka" (19).Even though the Sinhalese upholds Buddhist values such as tolerance and pacifism, but mostly they have resorted to ethnocentrism and militarism thus leading to bloodshed and violence on the island. Sinhala and Tamil communities in Sri Lanka both attain their cultural-religious identities in terms of histories that stretch back for at least 2,500 years. As Paul Cobley argues that in the "modern world, social circumstances and the self-identity within them are to a larger extent the manifestation of the texts and narration they frequently contain" (36).Thus, understanding the facets of Religion it could be argued that the Sinhalese politicized religion in order to maintain their dominant status in the state. Since the Constitution of 1972, Sri Lanka propagated itself as a Buddhistcountry upholding the national heritage and Buddhist culture, paradoxically, while in reality, they marginalized the minorities, depriving them of their political and cultural rights.

Another factor which accentuated the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka was language. Language has a significant potential to express ethnic boundaries and cultural identity. It is an institution historically created by the people, for the people, to build bonds, to communicate and also to create self-identification in a collective society. In this way, sharing the same language awakens the feeling of belonging to a particular group. In relation to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the power of language in the manifestation of the almost three-decade war is represented mainly in two aspects. One is of historical significance, principal historical documents were written in Sinhalese or Pali language and there are no significant texts in Tamil language narrating the Tamil advent or their history. Consequently, we reach an understanding of the past and its events through the Sinhalese or Buddhist perspective. Therefore, Sinhala language attained its "high prestige from the earliest times onwards and resulted in a long and significant body of classical literature" (Dharmadasa 118). Secondly, after independence, the government passed the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, which established Sinhala as the official language of the nation. The promotion of single language such as, Sinhala, as the national language of the country, symbolically assert the prominence of Sinhalese on the island. Various studies have regarded this political reform of 1956 as one of the disastrous beginnings of ethnic tension in the island. Regardless, the fact that other ethnicities of the population were not familiar with the Sinhala language; they understood this political reform as an instrument to curb their opportunities in various state sectors. Sinhalese felt that the "Tamils were able to make better headways than the Sinhalese in professions because they were ahead of the Sinhalese in English literacy opportunities for the learning of English" (Dharmadasa 128). They feared that post-independence if Tamil dialect was given the same linguistic status as Sinhala dialect, there might be a greater probability that with such high literacy and arduous business flourishing in the Tamil minority, they might become too powerful. Rather than political reform, it is a linguistic attack on the Tamil minority that deprives them of their cultural and political status. The apparent privileging of a single language in a multilingual situation succored the Sinhalese to enjoy their hegemony over other ethnic groups in all spheres of the

_____

nation, such as employment, economic life and especially in the field of education. Gordon Weiss in his documentary book, *The Cage*, discusses its after effects on university admissions where he states, "Banadaranike introduced changes into the university admissions process. Tamil applicants were required to achieve higher marks than their Sinhalese peers to enter prestigious university courses such as medicine and engineering..." (48). The reform jeopardized the chances of the Tamil minorities in the government job and business sectors, coupled with reforms in the educational sector, these issues led to the deterioration of the Tamil-Sinhalese relationship. Although there were various protests legally from minority groups, later the protest intensified in pogroms, violence, killings and civil war.

Another factor, which was propaganda by the Sinhalese for evoking their national feelings, was the glorification of the battle between King Duttugemunu and Tamil King Elara from the chronicle *Mahavamsa*. Even though, the text portrays Tamil King Elara as a great and just ruler, and King Duttugemenu'snefarious activities where he had to overpower "thirty-two Damila kings DUTTHAGAMANI ruled over Lanka in single sovereignty"(Geiger 175). The chronicle is renowned for its narration of solemnly uniting the island under King Duttugemenu. Even when race or religion was not much disputed at the time, the chronicle narrates the sheer violence with which several Damila kings were killed by Duttugemenu to establish a Sinhalese Buddhist nation. Many scholars consider this pogroms and violence as the torchbearer of the ethnic conflict in the island.The text makes reference to those violent killings, where it narrates, the battlefield after the war as King Duttugemnu, "slew many Damilas. The water in the tank there was dyed red with the blood of the slain" also including the killing of King Elara as the "burning of Elara, with sixty thousand men" (Geiger 175). In modern Sri Lanka, the episode became the emblematic of Sinhalese nationalism subduing the ferocious violence with which sovereignty was achieved. Yet, the text mentions several other episodes such as the empathy of King Duttugemnu towards his opponents, where, after all the victories, he ponders, "looking back upon his glorious victory, great though it was, knew no joy, remembering that thereby was wrought the destruction of millions (of beings)" (Geiger 177).But such episodes were never promulgated as they restricted the sovereign status of the Sinhala on the island. Moreover, to such manipulation of the literature, the Sinhala also erased the part of the myth where King Elara was honoured and Duttugemnu built a memorial for him. The text mentions, "he build a monument and ordain worship. And even to this day the princes of Lanka, when they draw near to this place, are wont to silence their music because of this worship"(Geiger 175).But the Sinhalese extremists disseminated only those historical events that succored their political propaganda.

The Prince Vijay myth or that of the battle between King Elara and King Duttugemneu is taught in schools, so that many children consider it as an undisputed history. Concerning Sri Lanka, the educational system played a significant role in

_____

manifestingSinhalese as the legitimate proprietor of the island.Sarah Graham-Brown in her study*The Role of Curriculum* points out that when a particular ethnic group dominate the government and has control over the curriculum it"often leads to the construction of a version of history, particularly of the recent past, whichheightens the role of that group at the expense of others" (28). Yet, another study by Bush and Saltarelli, in*The Two Faces of Education inEthnic Conflict,*did a comprehensive approach to education during the ethnic conflict. In their study they found Sinhalese textbooks as manipulating the history of the island,

> Sinhalese textbooks scattered with images of Tamils as the historical enemies of the Sinhalese, while celebrating ethnic heroes who had vanquished Tamils in ethnic wars. Ignoring historical fact, these textbooks tended to portray Sinhalese Buddhists as the only true Sri Lankans, with Tamils, Muslims and Christians seen as no indigenous and extraneous to Sri Lankan history. (13)

These kind of social exclusion and manipulation of history in schools reinforce certain essentialist identities based on ethnicity, religion, language etc. The process of education, teaching and learning, as well as the way schools function as institutions, carry their own powerful messages.Essentially, state-building seeks to present history as a rigid concept rather than to promote critical historiography skills among young minds.Therefore, children are thus forced to accept their story without dispute.Education is intended to inculcate critical thinking, social justice, responsible citizenship and respect for human rights in young minds.But in Sri Lanka, education was a political tool in the hands of state buildings to foster their history. In this way, they have marginalized other ethnic groups and their cultural identities through the manipulation of history.Therefore, classrooms which are supposed to build national equity only engender racial discrimination. Theminority children are left with the feeling of being the other or inferior, along with children of the majority are taught they are the more elite or dominant class of the society. They are not taught to respect the values and traditions of the minorities with whom they live. On a societal level, the discrimination endured in schools can plant the seeds for ethnic divisions and conflict.

Even though historically, the war between Ellara and Duttu Gemenu was not a war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. It was a war between two dynasties for control of the Anuradhapura kingdom for the Buddhists. These episodes from *Mahavamsa* are repeated and transmitted from generation to generation and they occupy a revered place in the present-day Sinhalese – Buddhist rituals beliefs.Neil DeVotta in his study mentions the resonance of these myth, in the political realm of the island,"the military success against the LTTE under the current Rajapakshe government have led to Rajapakshe being compared to Duttugamni" (9). Near the end of the ethnic war in 2009, people even tried to compare

_____

President Rajapaksa with Duttugemenu and the fatal death of LTTE leader Prabhakaran as that of King Elara.

"Myths clearly have been used, especially since the nineteenth century, for politicking purposes and have been deleterious to the fashioning of a peaceful polytechnic society with a common Sri Lankan identity" (DeVotta 9). The impacts of these myths and Historiographies have significant impact in the construction of a nation and its identity. The Chronicles were supposed to record the historical events accentuating the culture and civilization of the past. However, In Sri Lanka this cultural artifact prompted an ethnic tension; it led to bedeviled conflict of the future. Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Community* states the root cause for such brutal killings and colossal sacrifices lies in "the cultural roots of nationalism" (7). The seeds of nationalism these chronicles proselytize led to ethnic conflict rather than national unity. The Sinhalese coerced their bureaucracy on the island to legitimize the island. They upheld the myths and episodes from chronicles that supported their cause.Hence, to conclude the study, it is noted that the impact of the chronicles and myth in the construction of the social-cultural-political context of a nation is tremendous. The multi-dimensional impact of chronicles, such as, in the educational sector, political sector, state policies, and even in historiography studies, all stimulate the purpose of Sinhalese as the superior and rightful clan of the nation. It is to be noted how the inculcated the myth into school textbooks so that even the younger generation grew up to the ethnic division the Sinhalese extremist have propaganda to. They tried to connect the three decades of ethnic war with that of the Duttugemnu myth, showing that the inevitable fate of the Tamils to be defeated by the Sinhalese. All these manipulation of myths and history led to the national unrest among the ethnicities. History or Chronicles are supposed to help people to know about their lineage and understand the history of civilization. But in Sri Lanka, Chronicles manifested the course of the nation into two rival ethnicities, Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils.

The literatures are supposed to be approached in a critical manner and not read as indisputable. Critical historiography skills should be encouraged in schools, so that they are able to "identify the intersection between their personal stories and larger collective histories"(Bush and Saltarelli, 20). Education should be multidimensional, in which they should give voice to heterogeneous identities rather than enact a single national religion or language. Paradoxically, certain national policies, such as one national religion, language, which are supposed to demonstrate national unity, become the cause of national diversity.The majority Sinhalese after independence transformed myths and chronicles into weapons to set up their bureaucracy on the island. Sri Lankan ethnic conflict can be understood as battle between two civilization; Sinhalese and Dravidians, between two linguistic; Sinhalese and Tamil, between two religion; Buddhist and Hinduism. It was a battle of the past disputed in the present. Gordon Weiss in his book states,Sri Lanka as an

_____

emblematic of a nation "sliding into tyranny where myth-making, identity whitewashing and political opportunism have defeated justice and individual dignity"(Weiss 265).

References

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed., Verso, 2006.

Bentley, Michael, editor. "The Historiccal Narrative." *Companion to Historiography*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 833–52.

Brown, Sarah Graham. "The Role of the Curriculum." *Education Rights and Minorities: Report*, 07/94 ed., Minority Rights Group, 1994, pp. 27–32, www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/minorities_rights.pdf.

Bush, K.D., Saltarelli, D., 2000. *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peace-Building Education for Children*. Innocenti Insights no. 4, UNICEF, www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/ insight4.pdfS.

Cobley, Paul. *Narrative*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2014.

DeVotta, Neil. *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*. East-West Center Washington, 2007, www.files.ethz.ch/isn/45634/ps040.pdf.

Dharmadasa, K. N. O. "Sri Lanka." *Language and National Idnetity in Asia*, edited by Andrew Simpson, 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 116–38.

Geiger, William, Translator. *Mahāvaṃsa or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon*. Pali Text Society/Henry Frowde Oxford UP, 1912. *HathiTrust Digital Library*,hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x030126020.

Manogaran, Chelvadurai. *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*. U of Hawaii P, 1987.

Munz,Peter. "The Historical Narrative." *Companion to Historiography*, edited by Michael Bentley, 1st ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 833–52.

Oldenberg, Hermann, editor and translator. *The Dîpavaṃsa : An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record*. Williams and Norgate, 1879. *Hathi Trust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x030214797.

Weiss, Gordon. *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers*. Vintage, 2012.

Bush, K.D., Saltarelli, D., 2000. *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peace-Building Education for Children*. Innocenti Insights no. 4, UNICEF,www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/ insight4.pdfS.