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A Question per week answered

Question: - There are various articles by Sinhalese complaining about your message regarding the ban on the travel of Shavendra Silva and his family to United States' soil. They fear you have a political road map for the Tamils to separate. What is your take on that?

Response: - Rubbish! Firstly Shavendra Silva is a wanted man for war crimes and crimes against humanity and genocide. What is wrong in congratulating any country for such Country recognizing his past activities as criminal. If he is not guilty he should come forward to be investigated upon and tried by an impartial Commission of Inquiry consisting of members from the International Community. Secondly I certainly have a political road map but not for the North and East to separate. North and East are even now separated by language, religions, Topography, Geology, Environment and so on. We have a different language being spoken from pre historic times in the North and East to that spoken elsewhere though that language (Sinhala) is of recent vintage. Most of our people are either Christian, Muslim or Hindu. The Buddhists who occupy the North and East are those who were brought in during the last 100 years. When I was living in the old town of Anuradhapura in the 1940s lots of Tamils owned land in Anuradhapura. Mr.Nadarajah was Chairman, Town Council for 17 Years.

Of course there was a time when the Tamils were Buddhists long time ago but in course of time they gave up Buddhism to go back to their old religion Saivaism. This happened during the time when the Bakthi (Devotion) cult was developing in South India. Topographically and environmentally ours is a dry zone and we have

no rivers. Only tanks and wells. Geologically we have calcium carbonate content in our Earth. So to a great extent ours is a separate area. Our areas are distinct since majority of us speak the Tamil Language. Many of my Sinhala friends from the South coming to visit Nainativu comment on the change in environment, topography and language when they pass Vavuniya. Our people have to work very hard to receive Nature's bounties unlike our counter parts in the South.

So we are already separate but we are part of this Island brought together as one administrative unit since 1833. As a group of people having distinct language, areas of residence, common culture we are a Nation in terms of UN Covenants and International law. We are entitled to self-determination.

What your friends among Sinhalese who write about me think is that I advocate external self-determination. That is what the LTTE advocated. I do not advocate external self-determination. I advocate internal self-determination. It is the inability of many Sinhalese to understand this difference which has created so much of antipathy towards the Tamils including me. They think I am a traitor having been born and bred in the South I advocate external self-determination. I DON'T. I advocate federalism a political innovation to unite disparate units. In fact I am interested in ensuring the integrity of this Island, preserving its unity, assuring equality among all communities and hoping for economic regeneration for the whole Country enabled by the different communities walking together hand in hand but as equals. Today that equality is lacking. When you give greater importance to the language and religion of the majority community naturally all those who do not speak that language nor belong to that religion become secondary citizens. That is why most Countries advocate secularism.

The interesting fact about our problem is that the North and East were always Tamil speaking. In ancient times they were Saivaite. After introduction of Buddhism there was a period when Buddhism flourished among the "Demala Baudayo". But centuries ago the Tamils reverted back to Saivism. And later

Islam and Christianity took root among certain sections of the Tamils of North and East. There were no Sinhalese in existence then.

There never was a time when the Sinhalese occupied the North and East in large numbers. The Sinhala names now being bandied about for Tamil places of worship or residence were coined in recent times. A good example is Manal Aru. All registers during Dutch or English times and even after independence for about 30 years, the name Manal Aru appears. Suddenly the official registers refer to Weli Oya a translation of the Tamil name. Now the talk is that the area was always Weli Oya but the Cholas in the Tenth Century changed the Sinhala name to Tamil Manal Aru. This is preposterous! There was no Sinhala presence in Manal Aru except until recent State colonization of that area, when Sinhalese were brought there from elsewhere. In everything there is a tendency by certain ultra-Sinhala units among the Sinhalese to say Sri Lanka was always Sinhalese and the Tamils are recent immigrants from outside.

This idiotic statement does not hold water after recent excavations of archaeological findings. There is no doubt that the original inhabitants of this Island were Tamil speaking Saivites.

Firstly there were no Sinhalese at the time Buddhism was introduced to the Island. The Tamil king Deva Nampiya Theesan received the tenets of Buddhism from Mahinda Thera.

Secondly the language that was introduced after Buddhism took root was Pali. There was no Sinhala language then in existence. Mahawansa, the fiction written for the glorification of Buddhism was in Pali.

Thirdly the Sinhala language came into being, into usage as a language only in the 6th or 7th century AD.

Fourthly to refer to Sinhala Buddhists before the birth of the Sinhala language is preposterous. There was Buddhism but not Sinhalese before 6th or 7th Century AD.

Fifthly the historical evidence of the antiquity of the Tamils have now surfaced copiously since the time Professor Indrapala referred to “permanent Tamil settlements” during the time of the Cholas in his first book.

Sixthly the Sinhala diehards have been trying to prevent the surfacing of evidence which showed the antiquity of Tamil language and the permeation of Tamils in the North and East but they have lost the Battle now!

Now let me come to your question.

1. There is a misconception and misinterpretation among the Sinhalese about the statements I have issued in the recent past regarding self-determination, war crimes’ investigation, Buddhism and Shavendra Silva. I hope in the light of what I have said above this misconception would be corrected.
2. I am not asking for a separate state but for a federal system based on the merged North and East within an undivided Sri Lanka.
3. All my statements regarding Buddhism and the Sinhalese are based on historical truth. Historical truths should never be denied in a democracy. If my conclusions are wrong let us have an International group of historians writing our history. Their charges could be shared between the Sinhala majority government and Tamil majority Sri Lankan Diaspora.
4. Tamils’ right of self-determination in the merged North and East is a legal right. Tamils are a nation in Sri Lanka because they are indigenous to a particular territory consisting of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and thus my argument is that the Tamils have the right of internal self-determination. My conviction is that accepting Tamils as a nation and granting them maximum devolution within a federal set up in the merged North and East in an undivided Sri Lanka will give rise to highly stable coexistence and peace in Sri Lanka and make this country a wonderful place to live in. We could leave aside all the tensions and hatred of the past and start up a saner living for the peace and prosperity of this Island.

5. Sinhala people are kept in the dark without awareness of the rights of the Tamil people and the true history of the Tamils- this is a huge hindrance to peace in Sri Lanka.
6. There is clearly a portrayal of Tamils as ‘enemy’ by certain elements among Sinhala community. As a result, opposition to devolution and policies to assist ethnic harmony is on the rise in Sri Lanka and prejudice and hostility towards Tamils have increased manifold. Only truth can heal this – only truth can make this country a better and safer place for everyone. This is why I am insisting for an international independent war crimes’ investigation and communicating in Sinhala with Sinhala communities about our history and our rights. If after proper inquiry it is found that Shavendra Silva committed no wrong the Tamils will have nothing against him.
7. Some people are running propaganda against me to create a threat perception for national security. I love this country as much as anyone else in this Island. But for one community to control and dominate others in the Country is traitorous. That is not patriotism.
8. I have read some articles written by Sinhala writers saying I am advocating a separate Tamil Eelam. This is a perceived threat not the truth. This is also politics- some people exploit this threat construction to play vote bank politics and consolidate the voters by creating supposed enemies. I hope after the coming Parliamentary Election the diehard Sinhala Buddhists will correct themselves and their ways.

My humble request of my Sinhala brethren especially the Buddhists is for them to ask the question why would a man of 80 years who had been in the forefront to establish a Congress of Religions while still a young lawyer, who had been speaking at Amity Meetings for a long time to bring about amity among communities and religions want to start a separatist movement in the North and East? I have no need to separate human beings on the basis of ethnicity nor religion. My interest is to bring amelioration to my people who have been

suffering from around 1956 having lost their equality in that year. Sinhala chauvinism and Sinhala Buddhist hegemony have made our people lose hope and purpose in their life. Discrimination still goes on.

I have taken upon me the task of re-establishing the rights of the Tamil speaking. Even if I were to be taken into custody and threatened I will say only this. Please accept the Tamils as your equals. The problem then will end. If you don't do so persons like me who give prominence to Truth and Human Values will go on agitating come what may. Let not anyone think by death threats and cajoling and bribing our love for this Island, our language, our culture and our individually could be diminished or denied.

Justice C.V. Wigneswaran
Former Chief Minister, Northern Province
Secretary General, Tamizh Makkal Kootanii
Co- Chairman, Tamizh Makkal Peravai