

A Question per Week- 14.12.2019

Question:- What prevents the People of North and East of Sri Lanka from marching together with the other communities when the Upcountry Tamils and the Muslims are able to do so?

Response: A good question. We must remember certain external characteristics of the various communities in Sri Lanka. The Muslims have no doubt been in this country for considerable number of centuries but they have integrated with the Sinhalese and Tamils within the Island. Some are Sinhala speaking Muslims and some are Tamil speaking Muslims. The Tamil speaking Muslims are mostly resident in the Eastern Province and in certain areas in the Northern Province. They speak Tamil and therefore form part of the North and East. Their future is intertwined with the Tamils of the Northern and Eastern provinces.

The Upcountry Tamils have come to Sri Lanka within the last 200 odd years and they occupy areas outside the North and East. They have had no compunction in learning Sinhala and integrating with the Sinhalese. So too the Colombo Tamils.

But the Northern and Eastern Tamils are different. They have always occupied the area now roughly covered by the Northern and Eastern Provinces. There had been continuous occupation of the North and East throughout history by the Tamil speaking people. In fact their occupation extended up to Negombo in the Western Province and up to Kathirgamam in the South East. The Sinhalese have never occupied the North and East in large numbers except after 1833 when the country was bought under one administration by the British. It is true that there had been influx of Tamils during different eras first by the Pandians and there after the Cholas, Pallavas, Cheras and Nayaka Kings last. But that only meant they added to the number of indigenous Tamils of this Country. The Tamils were the original inhabitants of this Island.

They could trace their ancestry to the inhabitants of the Continent of Lemuria which covered the greater part of the present Indian Ocean in times gone by. The Lemuria Continent which was gobbled up by the Indian Ocean extended from Western Australia to Eastern Africa joining up with the Indian subcontinent. Therefore the present Tamils of the North and East

feel themselves to be the descendants of a long line of Tamil speaking people who have been occupying the Northern and Eastern regions continuously from pre Buddhistic times. Recently it has been accepted that Tamil is the oldest living language in the world.

On the other hand Sinhalese came by their Sinhala language only in the 6th or 7th Century AD. That is 1300 or 1400 years ago only. There was no Sinhala Language before that time. Some historians have painted all ancient Buddhists as Sinhalese. That is because since there was Buddhism in Sri Lanka before the Sinhala language came into existence they have identified earlier era Buddhists as Sinhala Buddhists. Those who were Buddhists at that time were Tamils whom Professor Sunil Ariaratne calls as Demala Bauddayo.

There are those who refer to Sinhala Prakrit as proof of the presence of the Sinhalese language from pre Buddhistic times. This is like saying my grandfather lived 100 years ago therefore I lived 100 years ago because I came from my grandfather! There was no Sinhala language until 1300 or 1400 years from now. So how could you refer to Sinhala Prakrit of a by- gone age 2000 years or more ago? The Sinhala language was not even contemplated at that time. The truth would be that those words of ancient times (Prakrit) may have been Pali or Tamil or other dialects in Sri Lanka which later came to make up the Sinhala Language. Sinhala is a conglomeration of languages.

At least 40% of the Sinhala words are Tamil. Its alphabet formation is similar to Tamil and South Indian Languages. To my knowledge lots of Hindi words were imported into Sinhala language as recent as in 1956-1965 when Professor Malalasekara was Ceylonese High Commissioner in India. He brought in lots of Hindi words into the Sinhala Language thus “Sinhalaicising” the Hindi words. Lots of legal terms in Sinhala for example are derived from the Hindi words used in North Indian courts. We have a habit of taking over something today and trace its origin to sources centuries ago and saying that that something existed so many centuries ago. Lots of names of Tamil Villages in the North and East were found appropriate Sinhala names during the past 70 odd years and we have transported those Sinhala equivalents to centuries earlier to say those Sinhala villages existed at that time! Kandarodai for example was Kandarodai always at least for centuries. The Sinhala word for it Kadurugoda was coined very recently. Now it is said Kadurugoda was the original place name! Kandarodai

Buddhist remains are Tamil Buddhist remains. There were no Sinhalese at that time contemplated even!

The Northern and Eastern Provinces have never been Sinhala. They were areas of residence of the Tamil speaking people. Tamils were Buddhists for quite some time until they reverted to their original religion Saivism when the Bakthi cult in South India influenced them. The Nayanmars have sung hymns to the deities in Thirukoneswaram and Thiruketheswaram before the Sinhala language was born. Further our Tamil literature of 2000 years ago were Buddhistic or Jain religion oriented. There was no Sinhala language then.

It is wrong to say Sri Lanka is a Buddhist Country. The Tamils who became Buddhist centuries ago jettisoned Buddhism and reverted to Saivism Tamils at one time being Buddhist and that too long before the Sinhala Language was born, does not give the right to anyone to claim that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist Country. The North and East must be separated as being majority non – Buddhist.

The Sinhala people have been given a wrong understanding of history based on the fiction written in Pali by a Buddhist Priest in the 5th Century AD. The author says that at the end of every stanza he was writing the fiction for the glorification of Buddhism. If he was writing history he would not have said so!

Now let me answer your question. The North Eastern Tamil speaking people are conscious of their antiquity. They are conscious of the richness of their language. They have a highly emotional bond towards their traditional homelands. But they feel constrained that the majority Sinhalese are not allowing them to blossom out on their own in their region but want to control them. There are certain rights which the Tamils have. In terms of the International Covenants they have their common language, they have their religions – Islam, Christianity and Hinduism, they have their traditional homelands where their forefathers have lived continuously from pre Buddhistic times. They also have their separate culture and way of life all different from the Sinhalese though there are many commonalities between the two communities due to their common origin as per DNA tests concluded recently.

They would therefore like to preserve their individuality. They are entitled to self determination in terms of International Law. Owing to the above said they abhor anyone trying to control them and dominate them on false premises. The Tamil speaking have always occupied the North and East and they still are the majority in the North and East.

The Sinhalese historians and others, especially the Buddhist clergy, have set up lots of falsities as history.

They say this country is theirs. This is false. The original inhabitants of this country were Saivite Tamils.

They say all Tamils were immigrants into a predominantly Sinhala Country. This is also false. Though it is true there were several influxes of Tamils at various times in history the existence of the Tamils in the North and East of this Island continuously as the majority community until today cannot be disputed.

They say the North and East were originally Sinhalese. This is also false. Simply because Buddhism existed in the North and East and there are Buddhist historical / archaeological remains in the North and East that does not prove the existence of the Sinhalese at some period in our past history. It only proves there were Tamil Buddhists – Demala Buddhayo!

They refer to Mahavamsa. Mahavansa is a fictional work written in Pali before the Sinhala language was born. It is not a historical document though its background particulars could help understand history.

Therefore we Tamils of the North and East are conscious of our antiquity, our history, our rights to self determination and therefore until our intrinsic rights to the right of self determination is recognized and respected we would find it difficult to march together with the other communities, specially the Sinhalese who have usurped our history and antiquity and trying to falsify those fields of study. If the historical facts just mentioned by me here are not accepted by the Sinhalese intelligentsia they are free to set up a Committee of Sinhala, Tamil, Indian and other International Historians and Archaeologists to re – write our history truthfully and affirmatively.

Muslims and Upcountry Tamils have no such common historical background to stand on. They have not lost anything as we are losing our lands, our language (still the Central Government often sends letters in Sinhala only to the North and East), our religions, our culture and our identity. Until they are restored to the Northern and Eastern Tamils how do you expect us to march together with others?

First recognise our individuality and our history. Then we will march hand in hand. When I was young prior to Independence we Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers, Muslims, Malays and even Chinese were able to look upon this Country as our own. When the Sinhalese claimed this Country as Sinhala Buddhist only, our individuality collapsed, and we have been made fourth class citizens! The Muslims and the Upcountry Tamils enjoy a freedom which the Northern and Eastern Tamils do not enjoy today.

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