

Introduction

On the 23rd of July 1983, the Tamil population of the Island of the Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka, suddenly found themselves to be a fatally vulnerable community. They found themselves surrounded by mobs of thugs who were backed up by socio-political and religious powers, and who had hit lists consisting of names and addresses of the minority Tamil community living among the majority Sinhala folks. The mobs were able to distinguish between the Tamils living in the houses of their own and those belonging to Sinhalese owners. This made it easy for them to decide which of them were to be burnt and destroyed and which to be only looted.

Suddenly the entire world was taken by surprise by the hell fire in the Island of Paradise. News, messages and pictures were broadcast in the media, of the atrocities and genocidal violence against the minority Tamil community in the country and became sympathetic to them and condemned the Government of Sri Lanka, composed mostly of the Sinhala politicians. Within a month, the Sinhala Government and population earned a bad name as a genocidal race in the world.

What surprised the outside world was how there could be such endemic violence in a tiny island known otherwise only for tea, spices and sun. The political and social problems of Sri Lanka were not known world-wide until this time. The island was known as the Land of Dharma - righteousness enlightened and governed by the doctrine of the Lord Buddha, the Lord of Non-violence and benignity - Ahimsa and Maitriya. The anti-Tamil riot project of 1983, was the eruption of the deep boiling volcano rather than an accident or unforeseen flood that sporadically mushroomed due to uncalculated isolated events.

Identity cards, speech and features betrayed the Tamils who were

travelling, unaware of the sporadic anti-Tamil program and were stabbed to death or burnt alive on the roads in their own vehicles. The Tamils living in the southwestern Sinhala areas, either because of their jobs or studies, and those who informed their dear ones in the northeastern part of the country that they would be returning home for a short visit for a few days with their family and relative, either never arrived or ended up in refugee camps and shelters. The few who survived and escaped the terror warned the others of the cruel situations in the south.

Political, social and religious powers in the past five decades, i.e., in the past independent era, however, proposed a hermeneutics and diagnosis of the ethnic crisis in the country with as much longevity and as deep-seated and as old as the history of the nation. Every religion has been either forcefully dragged into or have willingly entered into the scene at different times of the life of the nation. I perceive clearly how social, political, cultural, economical and religious components have been transformed into strands to be braided and plaited to make the rope that was used to strangle the minority communities Sri Lanka. This strangling rope-making process might have begun unsystematically in the remote past or it might have been fueled and fertilized by this or that event or person down through the centuries. But one thing is clear, i.e., the process acquired strength and system from the very beginning of the decolonization process and post-colonial era that began seven decades ago.

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Political, social and religious powers in the past five decades, i.e., in the past independent era, however, proposed a hermeneutics and diagnosis of the ethnic crisis in the country with as much longevity and as deep-seated and as old as the history of the nation. All religions have been either forcefully dragged into or willingly entered into the scene at different times of the life of the nation. I perceive clearly how social, political, cultural, economical and religious components have been involved to give momentum to the social political crisis. But one thing is clear, i.e., the process acquired strength and system from the time of the independence and were transformed into strands to be braided and plaited together to make the rope that was used to strangle the minority communities Sri Lanka. This strangling process might have begun unsystematically in the remote past or it might have been fueled and fertilized by this or that event or person down through the decades beginning from the decolonization process and post-colonial era that began seven decades ago.

As a little boy, I witnessed and experienced the atrocities and violence unleashed against the Tamils of this nation. As a member of this community, I, too, suffered the effects of feeling powerless against the oppressor. I saw with my own eyes the leaders and adult members of our community being beaten with batons and thrown into the lagoon or humiliated with foul and obscene language by the police and the government forces during and posts in the Tamil language were erased with tar asphalt or covered with cow dung. This was the reality from 1956 to 1965.

The failure to obtain freedom and dignity in social, political and economic spheres through democratic methods, caused the slow yet steady process of the armed liberation struggle of the Tamil militancy. Though over half a dozen liberation movements began in the last three decades (i.e., from 1970), over time they split into exclusive and rival groups according to their ideologies and strategies. Though this has weakened or defocused the liberation process, the struggle is yet ongoing and has become increasingly complex. The arena is filled with all sorts of characters, both local and international, as allies and foes of one or the other or both.

Where are the religions of the nation in this arena? Are they protagonists or promoters? Are they referees or spectators or are they watchful of the situation in order to aid the victims? Are they able to assert themselves vis-a-vis the politicians or are they used/abused by them? My firm conclusion is that as I have mentioned earlier, the religions make up but one strand of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, though many might give more importance than this, to them.

However, this is not to deny or degrade their role or resources for the possibility of restoring peace and harmony among the races and religions in Sri Lanka. Racial, political, and religious fundamentalism which have grown into enormous proportions in the country, can be dismantled eventually though not easily. The religions, in my firm opinion, are sufficiently endowed with peace making and harmony-fostering resources.

In the botanical sphere of Sri Lanka there is a potent paradigm which can provide the answer for the end of the ethnic conflict and the dawn of peace and forces during non-violence leaders and adult members of our community being beaten with batons and thrown into the lagoon or humiliated with foul and obscene language by the

police and government forces during non-violent protests. I witnessed with amazement and non-violent protests. I gazed with amazement and sadness, unable to comprehend fully why the names and places written on the public boards and posts in the Tamil language were erased with tar-asphalt or covered with cow dung. This was the reality from 1956 to 1965. The failure to obtain freedom and dignity in social, political and economic spheres through democratic methods, caused the slow yet steady process of the armed liberation struggle of the Tamil militancy. Though over half a dozen liberation movements began in the last three decades, over time they split into exclusive and rival groups according to their ideologies and strategies. Though this has weakened or defocused the liberation process, the struggle is yet on going and has become increasingly complex. The arena is filled with all sorts of characters, both local and international, as allies and foes of one or the other or both.

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In the botanical sphere of Sri Lanka there is a potent paradigm which can provide the

answer for the end of the ethnic conflict and the dawn of peace and harmony among the people of the nation. It is called *symbiosis*. In the forests one can see the wonder of two or three trees of different species growing in perennial embrace, somewhat like Siamese twins, reinforcing each other and not being drowned or overpowered by the other. It is a common sight to see the Banyan, the Bo, and the Palmyrah trees growing in such symbiosis. The Banyan and Bo belong to the “*ficus*” category and Palmyrah is a palm. Moreover, the first two are held to be symbols of Hinduism and Buddhism respectively, and the palm is characteristic of the Tamil community. This botanical paradigm can and should transform into political, social and religious paradigms, if one is to expect to have peace in the country.

Religions have the authority, even without power, to be the pedagogues for peace through supporting and strengthening symbiosis. Instead of comparing and contrasting their truth claims and efficacies in a competitive spirit, if they consider each other as co-responsible agents for the fostering of human dignity and emancipating the humanity from all enslavement and bondage through their basic resources, they will undoubtedly be able to form a powerful public opinion for peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. Both on account of, and in spite of their legitimate and natural differences, they can show the strength and power of solidarity and symbiosis as the feasible way for peace in pluralism. Thus they can approach the other spheres of societal organizations and convince them to approach symbiosis as also their method.

Therefore, in this thesis I shall illustrate and clarify the historical, cultural and political and religious factors which cost the gradual escalation of the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, and the strength and weakness of the various solutions proposed in different times and spheres. I shall also highlight the different genuine endeavors of symbiosis engaged in the last five decades as “signs of the times” that point to the possibility of

peace in the future. My analysis and diagnosis utilizes a rational, academic discourse and method, but that is not my ultimate goal. There has been, in my view, copious study of the Sri Lankan conflict both by local and international experts. My humble attempt is to draw from such studies, and from the praxis of persons longing for peace, living and working at ground level, and to show what I see from all this that might provide a path for peace and harmony in my country.

As a Christian priest, I cannot detach my study from my ministry. I have been engaged in my own little way, in the peace process for the last three decades. I have experienced an irreparable and shattering loss of my own little daughter, Florence Regis Rammya as a direct effect of this deadly conflict. In this sense, this thesis is also an authentic cry and yearning for life and peace, from an ever-bleeding heart. Hence, I shall reflect on my experience and engagements and say what my modest role will be for fostering peace in the future.

The first chapter will trace the history of Sri Lanka from its beginning up to the independence from colonial rule and will focus on the socio-political situations of the different periods. It will also point out the role of religions in such situations. The second chapter will spell out the gradual escalation of the ethnic crisis in the post-colonial era, fueled and fertilized by the same spheres, to solve this crisis, and will examine their strengths and weakness in finding a solution for the same. The fourth chapter will examine the possibility of the role of religions to be pedagogues and mediators for peace and harmony in Sri Lanka in the future through “symbiosis.” The efficacy of this method will be shown through the living engagements of such attempts in the last four decades. The fifth chapter will enlist my engagement and involvement in the intercommunal peace process and unfold a theology of symbiosis, emerging from all the praxis illustrated in this thesis. It is such symbiosis which I call *Samagama*

Samajam in the socio-political, cultural and religious spheres, that I firmly believe will usher peace and harmony in my country in the future.