

HISTORY AND POLITICS OF THE DEBATE

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Mr. Dayan Jayatileka was one of the initiators of the first Jathika Chintanaya debate in 1984. He is currently the Director - Conflict Studies at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and an Assistant Secretary of the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP).

The debate which came to be known later as the 'Jathika Chintanaya' debate has to be situated in its context which I would describe as the post July 1983 conjuncture. July '83 held different meaning for different people in the opposition. Different, divergent lessons were derived from the events of July '83. For some anti-UNPers, July '83 provided a glimpse of an Iranian type strategy for the overthrow of the UNP, a strategy which meant accommodation with and pandering to obscurantist, chauvinist forces - the broadest possible alliance against the UNP. And it involved a certain axis of attack on the UNP, an axis that was culturalist and retrogressive in its critique of dependent capitalism.

For some others in the opposition, July '83 lent itself to diametrically different conclusions. We felt that the forces of chauvinism and quasi-fascism should be combated irrespective of whether they emanated from within the government or from within the oppositional space. We understood that fascism has a mass character, that chauvinism can have a mass, popular base and that despite that it should be combated. This meant nothing less than a radical

rupture with all forms of populism and opened up the prospect of a new series of tactics and a new set of alliances.

As for this other line within the oppositional space, that of dialogue and consensus on a political solution to the ethnic problem and devolution of power to the Tamil areas, I think that Vijaya Kumaranatunge is the best known and the most powerful advocate of that particular line of thought and action.

The post July 1983 disposition of forces and different perspectives was summed up in a break through article by Dr. Newton Gunasinghe published on the May Day 1984 issue of the Lanka Guardian. Newton identified three lines within the opposition. Line 3 as he defined it was that of the perspective of a joint Sinhala-Tamil revolutionary struggle against the system. Line three intertwined with line 2 particularly after the Anuradhapura massacre of 1985. So in real terms line 2 and 3 formed a bloc against line 1 which was a precursor of Jathika Chintanaya. That was the political conjuncture in which the first Jathika Chintanaya debate was situated.

So the Jathika Chintanaya debate resulted in the crystallisation of 2 lines within the left and oppositional space. The All Parties Conference had been convened in this period and there was a major difference of opinion within the opposition as to whether or not they should participate in the APC, which after all was convened by the ruling United National Party. There were those of us who felt that the left should participate in the APC and put forward a rational political solution to the ethnic problem, coming to an agreement with rational sections within the ruling UNP. It was the notion of a cross class alliance, an alliance which cut across government and opposition. It was very difficult to bring this to fruition because of the militarism and myopia that was hegemonic within the government during this period. The doves or those who opted for political solution were themselves neither consistent nor strong.

Political and ideological conjuncture

Most observers and commentators about the 'Jathika Chintanaya' debate do not locate it in this very important political and ideological conjuncture. Political conjuncture in the sense of post July '83 - cum-All Parties Conference; ideological conjuncture in the sense of a two line struggle within the opposition as to the strategic alliances and the platform for anti-UNP, anti-state struggle. If you project this debate over time you will find the most extreme expression of the 'Jathika Chintanaya' line, in the JVP/DJV phenomenon. The back drop to the JVP

armed uprising was provided by a series of coalitions which shifted and re-composed; I refer mainly to the 'Mavubima Surakeeme Vyaparaya' and the alliances between the SLFP and JVP at the grass roots level.

diagnosis of the failure of the left was entirely different and remains so. I reject the notion that the failure of the left is sourced in any way in its neglect of culture and its so called rootlessness. To give just one

critique because it diverts historians and left activists from the real errors of the left, and therefore from the real rectification and renovation that needs to be undertaken. I myself source the errors of the left in realms of strategy and theory.

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Part of the ideological conjuncture was a critique of the Marxist movement by Dr Nalin de Silva. Having broken off from the Nava Samasamaja Party, he evolved a critique of the left, which was not really original - it was an old critique pioneered by people like Philip Goonewardene - that the main folly and flaw of the left was that it ignored Sinhala traditions and culture and indeed that it was alien to and frankly hostile to those traditions and that culture. That was Nalin's postmortem on the left. Mind you this debate was taking place not only in a post-July '83 conjuncture but in the broader context of the retreat and defeat of the left, in Parliamentary elections of '77 and in the extra parliamentary theatre general strike of July 1980 and then again electorally in the 1982 Presidential elections. Nalin advanced this thesis at a Seminar organised by an Association of former University graduates. The title of the debate was on "The Role of the Intellectual in present day Sri Lanka". The sole other speaker at this seminar was myself and my own

example, how can Nalin's thesis explain the fact that the late Leslie Goonawardena, who came from a Christian and very well to do background, studied abroad in France among other places, retained his seat in the overwhelmingly Sinhala Buddhist Panudura for a great number of years? And then again there is the other favourite story of the Jathika Chintanayites, that Dr. N. M. Perera called Dutugemunu a 'Gadol Modaya' in the 50's. This took place during the Minneriya by election of 1952. At this by-election three parties contested - the UNP, the SLFP and the LSSP. The SLFP which has an impeccable Sinhala-Buddhist profile fielded a candidate with unimpeachable Sinhala Buddhist credentials, namely Mr C. P. de Silva. The LSSP, despite N. M. Perera's remark during the campaign beat the SLFP into third place and it came second only to the UNP. Mind you this was in Minneriya, a rural Sinhala Buddhist seat. So I think the historical record give the lie to the Nalin critique of the left. I felt at the time and I still do now, that it's a very dangerous

This exchange at the Seminar was followed up at a yet another Seminar on Colombo University where Nalin and I crossed swords once again. The scene then shifted to the Public Library where we sponsored a seminar with the very provocative title "Do we Sinhala have a great cultural tradition". By this time Dr Newton Gunasinghe had advanced his highly original notions about Sinhala culture.

Our friend Ajith Samaranayake, writing in the Island, summarised the exchanges at the first two seminars between Nalin de Silva and myself. He tilted very heavily towards the Nalin de Silva version of things. I replied to Ajith in the Island and he and I debated this. That was the genesis, in print, of the debate which later came to be known as the 'Jathika Chintanaya debate'.

Now, after the Public library seminar on the cultural tradition of the Sinhalese, the 'Divaina' took up cudgels against us and provided an enormous amount of space for Nalin de Silva. I replied to Nalin and in this reply I even touched on the baila, (I noticed that the baila has been part of the debate even this time around as well). I defended the baila as part of our urban popular culture and not something to be excoriated and rejected. In my rejoinder to Ajith Samaranayake and Nalin

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de Silva I cited the arguments of Newton Gunasinghe and Charles Abeysekera and the Social Scientist's Association. Nalin then proceeded to attack their thesis and Newton and Charles lead the fight back in the pages of the Divaina. When Newton and Charles entered the debate it broadened out and some of the Jathika Chintanaya ideologues not only took on their thesis on the question of Sinhala culture but launched an attack on the Social Scientists Association's exercise in secular-radical historiography.

So one could very well say that the debate between Nalin, Ajith and myself triggered off the entire Jathika Chintanaya debate. I don't think any researcher could go further back than that and find any starting point that was anterior to this exchange.

The Wimp Factor

I must say though that I was very disappointed at the behaviour of our secular marxist intellectuals with the exception of Newton. At the time that I was underground, the S.S.A. held a seminar at which Serena Tennekoon, one of our most brilliant young academics who died very tragically at an early age, presented her paper on the Divaina debate. A friend of mine, Qadri Ismail, who also presented a highly original paper on the Muslims at this seminar, told me that Serena, having made her presentation then looked round the room and asked those others present why they did not continue to write to the Divaina when the Jathika Chintanaya ideologues opened fire. They had sent in one or two replies but as the debate

went through it's various rounds the good guys (and gals), the secular marxist intellegentsia, just stopped writing in. Therefore Serena has a very valid question. She wanted to know why that happened. I was told that none of these people, the other protagonists in the debate, none of them who were in the room at that time had any reply, They just looked at each other and had no answer to Serena.

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I believe that this debate was a crucial turning point in our intellectual history, in the history of the left and also perhaps in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. Because at the very moment the democratic left gave up the battle of ideas; it lost the intellectual initiative. Thanks to Gramsci (if not Lenin) we know the intimate connection between the ideological struggle, the battle for ideas, and the political battle. That force which abdicates the ideological struggle also loses the political. When the intellectuals of the left do not discharge their intellectual responsibilities, then the left as a whole goes into recession.

So, I think, the Jathika Chintanaya debate told us something about ourselves; about the left movement as a whole. The organised left parties did not take up the ideological challenge, the NSSP for instance was waffling because it saw Nalin's line as part of the anti government struggle and therefore not as an entirely hostile phenomenon. The LSSP and the

CP stayed completely out of the fray and so also the other smaller left groups. The left intellectuals chickened out. And it was then that Nalin and the Jathika Chintanites went on to the counter offensive.

Any close study of the rise of the JVP will reveal very clearly that it was linked to their hegemony in the Universities and among the younger

sections of the intelligentsia. That hegemony is related to the Jathika Chintanaya battle. After the left intelligentsia withdrew from the battle field, the Jathika Chintanaya held a clear field. I would even go so far as to say, that if the left intellegentsia held its ground at that time in 1985/86 it may not have had to go into internal and external emigration, into internal and external exile, in the face of the JVP onslaught later. By failing to resist at a time when resistance had a possibility of success, they created the conditions for their own marginality. Unfortunately, those of us who had triggered off the ideological debate were absent by this time since we were engaged in other political endeavours related to what we thought were higher forms of engagement and commitment.

That then is a brief history of the Jathika Chintanaya debate, I must say that the Jathika Chintanaya ideologues, the bad guys and gals, Nalin, Susantha, Hema and the others proved to be much more consis-

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tent than courageous in their commitments to their project than our friends proved to be in their commitment to the left democratic project. I remember a phrase of an American military strategist commenting on North and South Vietnam in the context of the Cold War and complaining and lamenting 'how come they got the Prussians and we got the Bavarians'. Well, that is what I ask myself when I reflect on our intellectuals, academics and social scientists on the broad left. I also begin to understand why Che Guevara liked this line of Frederick Wilhelm II 'God save me from my friends. I can take care of my enemies myself!'

The Second Jathika Chintanaya Debate

What then is the significance of the second Jathika Chintanaya debate? What is the conjuncture within which it takes place? The second Jathika Chintanaya debate takes place in the post IPKF, post JVP conjuncture. On the part of the Jathika Chintanaya ideologues it is a component of a broader political project. The contours of this project has been set out fairly clearly by Gunadasa Amerasekera. Amarasekera explains that he sees three waves in the rural based nationalist movement. The JVP is the third wave Dharmapala and the 1956 being the first two. The Jathika Chintanaites, who have out-looked the JVP in strictly biological terms hope to capitalise on

the achievements of the JVP. They hope to pick up the pieces of the JVP's violent campaign. They do not share the caricature of Marxism, the Marxist fundamentalism that was part of the JVP's make up. But they hope to stitch together a broad oppositional bloc against the regime and it's economic model. One thing that is new in the disposition of forces in the current conjuncture is that segments of the democratic left and the new left which belongs

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to what Gunasinhe called line 2 – the rational line in the post 83 period – have now shifted over to Line 1 – that of the broadest possible unity against the UNP notwithstanding the presence of chauvinist and retrogressive forces. There has been defections from the Line 2 and some from the Line 3 of the revolutionary new left group escales into Line 1. So the Jathika Chintanaites nestle cheek by jowl these days with the traditional left and a few new left elements in a new bloc. The current and latest political expression of this is the loose 5 party bloc that was formed a few weeks ago inclusive of the S.L.F.P

Jathika Chintanaya itself has developed different tendencies in the current period. There are few who find it compatible with

some variant of the open economy. This I think is similar to the Malaysian 'Bhumi Putran' notion of a capitalist economy, which is mono ethnic. But for most parts Jathika Chintanaya goes hand in hand with a model of a closed economy. So I see this as a kind of intellectual protectionism. I think that the post IPKF, post JVP conjuncture presents us with new prospects and new tasks. I think that the two civil wars – the Sinhala on Sinhala and Tamils on Tamil – has caused a significant dent in the ideological constellations of Sinhala and Tamil chauvinism. Therefore these conflicts can be made to give positive results in the sense of the pressure and fragmenta-

tion of the old certainties the old prejudices and the old blocs. I think that President Premadasa's dialogue with the Tigers, though it might not bring the desired result of ethnic peace, is certainly a break through in terms of communications. These political forces who are today grouped in the APC process and are present at the representative committees of the APC, are the secular democratic wing of the opposition and the government. Here you have an ingathering of the most rational realistic sections of our polity. This is the line up as the Jathika Chintanaya debate No. 2 takes place currently. The dividing line is between those who are for and oppose the APC process that is underway today; between those who believe in partisan confrontation or zero sum game in politics and those of us who

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much akin to 'Jathika Chintanaya'.

The task is to bring together a block of social groups and

as a broad social and political concept. I believe that we can speak of Lankan in a loose sense, in the sense of a single Lankan society though not a Lankan nation. Lankan society is in fact bi-national and multi ethnic counting the muslims. Therefore, this Lankan Chintanaya will necessarily have to be multi national, a 'Bahu Jathika Chintanaya' as distinct from a Jathika Chintanaya'.

The kind of consciousness we need is pluralist, multi national, modern, trans-national and internationalist; a consciousness that is democratic. In short to the project of Jathika Chintanaya I counter-pose the Gobachovian construct of a new thinking, a 'Nava Chintanaya'.

**Jathika Chintanaya, No !
Nava Chintanaya, Si!**

In Societies like Sri Lanka there will always be some variant of Jathika Chintanaya or in peripheral societies like ours, in Asiatic societies (as Marx, Engels and Lenin put it) there will remain social strata from within which emanates this kind of backward looking and reactionary ideology. This is more so because capitalist growth specially of an externally propelled, externally oriented sort i.e. dependent capitalist growth – generates a vast array of contradictions and causes the disintegration and decline of traditional social forces, while creating new social forces. The social forces going into decline will always throw up ideologies similar to Jathika Chintanaya. Marx pointed to this phenomenon as far back as the Communist Manifesto in which he spoke of anti-capitalist ideologies, types of socialism which were feudal or petty bourgeois. These kinds of socialism were reactionary as far as Marx was concerned. What we have here is an extension of this. This is also visible in countries that have not experienced dependent capitalist growth. The Soviet Union today as well as Eastern Europe demonstrates certain anti perestroika trends which are very

forces which are modernist and this can be done only on the basis of a different kind of 'Chintanaya' a different kind of project. On the one hand you need this coalition of forces to beat back Jathika Chintanaya which has a hegemonic project on its agenda. Conversely you need a different kind of ideology if you are to bring together a block of modern, secular democratic forces.

What then is the kind of Chintanaya we need? It is precisely a Chintanaya that is not Jathika Chintanaya. It is a Chintanaya, that is 'desheeya' in the sense of Lanka – Lankan

It has to be a pluralistic ideology, an ideology that is based on the recognition of pluralism not one that has as its cornerstone a unitarian nation of Sri Lanka, commitment to a unitary state as distinct from united.

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Correction

Mr. Neville Jayaweera was the Director of the World Association for Christian Communication (a sister organization of the World Council of Churches). Our statement in the April issue saying that he was the head of the World Council of Churches Programme Against Racism was a mistake. We deeply regret this error.