



Sri Lanka in the Context of International Development and Global Politics

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Conflict, as much as cooperation, has been and will continue to be an integral part of the human condition. This is true at an interpersonal as well as at other levels. Often, conflicts come to the surface and are played out violently in the open, but most of the time, they remain underneath the surface, creating tension, unease and uncertainty. This seemingly inevitable social phenomenon has occupied the minds of both philosophers as well as social scientists for a long time, giving rise to a large body of literature dealing with the issue. We are familiar with conflict theories in the sociological literature. As the world around us clearly demonstrates, in a more practical sense, conflict is something that we have to face or deal with, either to prevent it before it breaks out or resolve it when it is in full swing. Moreover, when conflicts occur, we have to deal with its aftermath or consequences in a reasonable and rational manner, in order to create an environment conducive for co-existence or to prevent the recurrence of conflict.

Even if we leave aside the philosophical and social science discourses on the subject, human beings, both as individuals and groups, and indeed as societies, have no choice but deal with conflicts of various kind. It is this compulsion to deal with potential or actual conflict that has given rise to all forms of practical strategies to prevent or resolve conflict, including the

use of force, which we are all familiar with today.

As is well known, conflicts usually arise due to conflicting ideas and interests at all levels of human social organisation. With increasing interactions, inter-connections and inter-dependencies among human societies across the world over the last several centuries, a global consciousness has slowly emerged through a complex process of inter-societal exchange of ideas and values. These exchanges have not always been peaceful and orderly, as invasions, colonial encounters and wars, etc. have amply demonstrated. Nevertheless, such experiences have pointed to the need to find ways and means of reconciling differences, no matter how difficult it is in practice. On the other hand, such global bodies as the UN and a plethora of international covenants, charters and conventions are also a clear expression of the above felt need. Yet, it is not more than wishful thinking to assume that human beings, let alone human societies, could shed all their differences with respect to ideas and material interests and agree to live together peacefully devoid of any conflict. For the differences are bound to arise, creating the need to continually find ways and means of reconciling conflicting ideas and interests.

As for material interest, human beings initially learned to effectively exploit the natural environment around them to satisfy their multiplying needs. And then they began to grab material resources, including labour from others around them and beyond. As the

present phase of capitalist expansion under neo-liberalism clearly shows, these human endeavours today encompass the whole planet. The increasingly complex international division of labour that facilitates the movement of capital, technology, people and commodities across the world is the result. As for ideas, human beings used their reflective, imaginative and creative capacities to come up with diverse ideas that began to shape the ways in which they related to each other and perceived the world around them. The result is an incredible diversity of cultures across the globe. This has long been the domain of social and cultural anthropology. So, we have the great religions and their diverse extensions, beside all forms of mundane rituals that are either related to or independent of, great religions. All religions are not the same, in spite of the claim that there are certain underlying core values and moral principles. We have diverse kinship systems, different social hierarchies, etc.

Many people do not want to compromise on their cultural values and social practices because either they highly value them or they serve their personal and collective interests. These cultural differences are real, because they at times divide people into opposing camps at different levels and lead to real conflicts. Conflicts, when they become violent and brutal, result in deaths, destruction and mass displacement leading to great human suffering. It is this reality that has persuaded human beings to find ways to facilitate or promote peaceful co-existence, on one hand, by finding common ground and, on the other, by promoting respect for, and tolerance of cultural differences. We have many examples of both today, at both global and national levels. Yet, conflicts, disputes and disagreements occur all the time, both within and between states. The reason for this is obvious: conflicts of ideas and interests cannot be resolved once and for all. They persist and evolve with changing circumstances. For instance, the dominant ideas and practices of development today have given rise to increasing competition for material and human resources and, as a result, many international disputes are related to trade, raw materials, water, land, technology and financial capital. Recent revelations regarding inter-state spying both in the West and in Asia point to the under-cur-

rents of competing national interests that seem to undercut seemingly collaborative trade and security alliances between and among countries. Nevertheless, the new global economic order has also made countries and regions so interdependent that economic trouble in one country can adversely affect the economies of other countries, as the global economic crisis a few years ago clearly showed. Moreover, economic and political trouble in one country can persuade at least some of its people to jump into boats and head towards countries that are more peaceful and prosperous. This has become a big headache for countries like Australia in recent years.

What is outlined above shows how difficult it is for human groups and societies to avoid conflict over ideas and interests and come up with a set of universal values that can bind them together and provide a basis for peaceful coexistence both within and across societies. The present controversy in Sri Lanka over human rights in the aftermath of three decades of ethnic war between the Sri Lankan state and the minority Tamils clearly illustrates this reality.

Many Sri Lankans, including some of the leaders of the country, do not seem to believe that ideas can have any intrinsic value, independent of personal, sectarian or collective interest. This is particularly so when it comes to ideas held by the others, in particular, the West, not necessarily the ones held by them, no matter how parochial and sectarian the latter might be. The country is already too divided ideologically and, as a result, many people do not have the capacity or the willingness to transcend cultural, social and political divisions in order to find common ground. Western modernity, partly due to its colonial lineage, is rejected and discredited by many, in particular by the nationalist intellectuals. Fundamental ideas of equality, secularism, social citizenship, reason, rule of law, etc. that inspired many adults and youth in Sri Lanka several decades back are increasingly replaced by notions of hierarchy, religious fundamentalism, ethnocentrism, religiosity, political expediency and sectarianism. The fact that Sri Lankans have no choice but find a way to co-exist within a shared physical and political space and work towards a common future is often overlooked. However imperfect the

modern democratic form of government might be, no country has yet found a better, practical alternative to it. On the other hand, if we accept this form of government, then it is useless to have it just in form devoid of its spirit and content, because it is the practical application of democratic principles enshrined in the constitution and other national and international statutes that gives hope and confidence to citizens that peaceful coexistence in a just society is a real possibility. On the other hand, secular democratic values that underpin the democratic form of government cannot

be easily reconciled with sectarian interests without undermining the democratic system itself. Unfortunately, we cannot do much about the fact that the institutions that go with this form of government are often traced back to the recent history of the western world. But then, this is not the only western baggage that we are saddled with. An extreme example would be western medical technology without which many sick people in Sri Lanka, including many of the elderly, are unlikely to survive for long.

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