

Sri Lanka in the Twenty-First Century

Legacies and Challenges

Report >
Sri Lanka

Scholars of Sri Lanka Studies from around the world exchanged their ideas and research findings in the congenial atmosphere at the South Asia Studies Centre, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India under the aegis of the eighth International Conference on Sri Lanka Studies. Nine working sessions on various aspects of the island-society, a one-day workshop on India-Sri Lanka relations and ritualistic Inaugural and Valedictory Sessions were held.

By Karori Singh

The scholars discussed the achievements of the island-nation in economic development, social harmony, evolution of political institutions, international relations and related policy issues mainly in the post-colonial period. Mutually reinforcing one another the ideological contradictions and social awareness manifest themselves in the present crisis and problems of society. In this, history has been used to create polarized identities and differential mobilization. It is up to social scientists not to overstress or aggravate

the conflict but instead to promote harmony and convergence. Through information and communication technology, the diaspora started playing a significant role in generating national or sub-national consciousness. This however does not delimit the role of history, linguistic composition, cultural symbols, and other primordial aspects. Long-distance nationalism has developed alongside cohesive sub-nationalism and nationalism on the island itself. Whatever, the consciousness formation, it was no doubt instrumental to achieve sub-nationalist goals rather than integrative ones. The fail-

ure of integration is aptly yet sadly illustrated by fact that the Bhikkuni (buddhist nuns) order has not been restored despite the peaceful movement for its restoration. The restoration of such an order might have made qualitative changes in the Sinhalese Community. The Tamil Nationalist Movement, on the other hand, became separatist in the course of long colonial domination and post-colonial governance.

While constitutional devices and the democratic polity have been manipulated, the liberal ethos of democracy has not evolved on the island. Herein lies

the root cause for most of the problems that the island-nation is facing. A liberal, accommodative approach has been suggested as remedy of most of the evils in the society. Studies of electoral processes reveal a positive correlation between modernization and political participation. However, stated modernization is buttressing primordialism in democratic politics. Though these trends have not crippled democracy, a pressing problem of balancing modernization with traditionalism remains.

The adoption of pro-globalization policies has increased competitiveness, yet allowing globalization to direct the restructuring of production and governing processes is inimical not merely to general employment but to human welfare at large. Thus, the globalization process should be further examined

and subsequently be calibrated to the needs and potentials of the people. On the one hand, various communities and social groups started taking their own initiatives. On the other, extra-national economic forces are leaving their imprints not only on the economy but also on society at large. Further research and innovation in this regard is deemed necessary.

Community Resource Management

Trends indicate that local communities are increasingly being empowered to conserve and manage natural resources. Irrespective of the regional and social disparities the island society is performing very well in regard to social development policy and practice. Some apprehensions were raised in regard to the accuracy of the statistical

information regarding the social development. It has been stressed that despite the hiccups, the island society is performing well comparing with other South Asian Countries. Moreover and despite the social turmoil and violence in recent decades, poverty reduction has been sustained better than previously during the 1990s, which was due to the positive impact of the globalization process, thus suggesting that speeding up liberalization may alleviate poverty. However, these positive developments may well prove to slide down the scale and the future may well hold stagnation and mediocre results. These predictions are based on the acknowledgement of certain imbalances and inherent problems in both the socio-economic realities and the political changes that characterize the island society.

India-Sri Lanka Relations

The asymmetry between India and Sri Lanka in terms of size, strength, and resources makes their relations at times problematic, particularly during the periods of internal crisis in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's internal power politics and its ethnic orientation have generated cracks in its moderate and composite nationalist worldview. The country's internal conflict has created space for international NGO's to play an important role in its foreign policy, which, in fact, is a step towards the privatization of foreign relations. The self-adopted role (of intervention) that NGOs play in Sri Lankan foreign policy should not only worry Sri Lanka but should also worry India which has always guarded against external interference in the island society. In fact, Sri Lanka occupied very important place in India's for-

ign policy calculations. Economically, Sri Lanka is greeted by profitable opportunities for trade and commercial intercourse in the Indian Ocean region. There is ample scope for developing a positive maritime relationship between India and Sri Lanka by expanding shipping facilities, port collaboration in shipyards and even cruise-ship tourism. The most important step for cooperation in South Asia has been taken with the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement. Whereas the sources of conflict between the two countries are gradually diminishing, the scope for closer cooperation is fast expanding due to mutual benefits and a growing understanding.

The conference concluded with an assertion that the island-society is a universe in itself for the social scientists for experimenting and evolving the the-

ories and concepts for further study of any such society. It has provided an appraisal of the legacies, which the country has inherited and challenges emerging during the twenty-first Century and concluded with the understanding that the legacies are ambiguous and reality is complex but the challenges are clear and obvious. However, the legacies and challenges imply certain cracks and wounds, which are to be cemented and healed through innovative research inspired by a deep and abiding interest of the international community of scholars of Sri Lanka Studies. Only when using the appropriate methods and techniques of social science research, will we be able to underline and identify the challenges for the island in the twenty-first century. With such an understanding of Sri Lanka's legacies and reality, the policies

for empowerment, entitlement, equity, inclusion, and environment need reorientation in the twenty-first century. ◀

*Karori Singh was the Coordinator for the above-described conference and is affiliated to the South Asia Studies Centre at the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India.
E-mail: karsiapc_jp1@sancharnet.in*

More info >

During the conference, a committee of seven scholars was formed to coordinate the activities of Sri Lanka Studies during the two years till the ninth ICSSL. The committee kindly invites institutions and organizations interested in holding the ninth edition of this important conference to send in their proposals.

E-mail: karsiapc@jp1.dot.net.in