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RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, A BANE TO PROGRESS

"It is not our differences that divide us, but our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences"
- American poet Audre Lorde



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Our beautiful Motherland Sri Lanka is a nation embellished with centuries of recorded history. When we delve into this history we can see a bountiful self-sufficient nation where people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds existed in total peace. It was this brotherhood that enabled our ancient monarchs to build glorious religious places of worship, massive irrigation reservoirs that enriched agriculture and ancient water parks. Of course there was the occasional "infighting" between regional regents, but history reveals prudent kings who united the country and ruled with good will.

As universal human rights become increasingly accepted as the core principles of governance, democracy becomes the most effective way of implementing those principles - equality, representation, participation and accountability, which are urgently needed in Sri Lanka. Democracy is a system for managing differences without recourse to violence. Differences (of opinion, belief, ideology, culture etc.) are a natural part of every society. And conflict arises from such differences. The goal of reconciliation is a future aspiration, something important to aim towards, perhaps even an ideal state to hope for. Reconciliation is an over-arching process which includes the search for truth, justice, forgiveness and healing.

SPIRIT OF NATIONAL UNITY

Are Sri Lankans united now with the emergence of the "Aragalaya" (the peoples struggle) to consolidate democracy? If so, how long will we sustain this spirit of national unity? Are there sinister political plots to divide and promote racial disharmony once again?

Today on the eve of the Black July riots of 1983 which specifically targeted the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka by racism induced Sinhalese mobs, let all Sri Lankans search their conscience, in accordance with their religious values. Please ask yourself what did we gain as a nation by these violent acts of racism? Thousands of Tamil homes were torched, women raped and families destroyed forever. Thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils became refugees overnight, seeking asylum overseas. This generation must know that the Sri Lankan Government at this moment in history failed to mobilize the Police and Armed Forces to protect innocent civilians. But there were hundreds of decent Sinhalese who displayed the true teachings of Buddhism and offered shelter and food to their afflicted Tamil neighbours. What did the international community think about Sri Lanka and its government at that time? What did Sri Lanka gain by the burning of the magnificent Jaffna Library which was considered the best in Asia. This library was used in bygone years by thousands of Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher students.

There was a beautiful era in Ceylon when Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers studied in the English medium. Of



Unity in diversity is our strength.

course they learnt their mother tongue as one subject, but all students sat collectively in one class room. This fostered the ability to understand each other. At one stage in Sri Lanka all government jobs were equally distributed among the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers, because of their prowess in English. Later selfish politicians rooted in racism tried to limit the number of minority communities joining the government departments, in which the politicians later succeeded. To generations of Ceylonese who lived and worked in peace, language and race was never a hazardous barrier.

Division is a weapon used with great skill by politicians of most parties in Sri Lanka over the decades. We were forced to silently witness many politicians using the art of dividing people in the realm of ethnicity, religion and language. On a recent visit to Galle Face I heard a few posh youth in branded clothing, standing near the opulent Shangri-La hotel and pointing towards the large statue of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and saying "He is the person who divided this beautiful country by creating the declaration of Sinhala as the State Language". Indeed the late Prime Minister is seriously guilty of creating an abyss of division on the lines of language, whilst he and his children were educated in English, earning their degrees overseas. This selfish short sighted decision, happily endorsed by other racist Parliamentarians saw a new

breed of Sri Lankans. A new class of "apey jathiya" doctrine inculcated people who thrived in their clan identity and failed to study English emerged. These folk were anything but patriotic. They went a step further and discouraged other aspiring students from studying in English, which created an entire generation of young people who were disconnected from the rest of the world because of their inability to connect in the English language. They mocked those who spoke English as using the "kad-duwa" (Sinhalese for sword). There are thousands of such ignorant Sri Lankans living among us even today.

The racist act of Prime Minister Bandaranaike wiped out one ethnic group within months- the Burghers. These fun loving folk

migrated in their thousands to England and Australia. The remaining Tamils and Muslims were restricted from progressing in their government jobs due to the "Sinhala Only" policy and subsequently hundreds of learned Tamils and Muslims migrated to other European countries. Another "racial" issue that stemmed up is the writing of the birth certificates, where Sri Lankans are divided into Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. Why can't we all be Sri Lankans? Look at the passports of Sri Lankans living overseas; it simply says citizens of America, England, Germany, Italy or France. Sri Lankans desire to migrate overseas because they can live with dignity and equality, among other things.

The dirty and cowardly seeds of racism took root and divided Sri Lanka. We have witnessed the race riots of 1956, 1977 and 1983. There needs to be accountability for these hate induced crimes of Black July, though many of the perpetrators are dead. Until the beginning of the Aragalaya in April this year people never voiced their opinions about race related division so openly and vociferously in public. Thankfully Sri Lanka is now united, which is a threat to some politicians. The uprising of Sinhalese youth from the South initially in the form of the JVP saw the murder and disappearance of thousands of young Sinhalese men. If these men had an English education, they would have had better jobs and a secure lifestyle and not taken up arms. Likewise the youth uprising from the North demanding for equality and equal opportunity, finally gave way to a fully fledged armed confrontation. This could have been controlled (and disarmed) if their political aspirations were met within the legal framework of a united Sri Lanka, with prudent political decision making

by those in authority. Of course there were many "behind the scene" stakeholders with geopolitical interests who desired to destabilize our nation. After 30 years of fighting we saw the death of thousands of Sinhalese and Tamil young men, they were all Sri Lankans. What did we gain by this prolonged conflict that has left hundreds of youth disabled and emotionally scarred and drained Sri Lanka of intellectuals who hurriedly migrated overseas?

RECONCILIATION PROCESS

At the political level, failure to address the past through a reconciliation process will almost guarantee the failure of the future. Sadly in Sri Lanka the recommendations of the LLRC were not fully implemented for the benefit of the entire country. Meaningful reconciliation is a difficult, painful and complex process, but it must be grasped, because ignoring it sows the seeds of later, greater failure. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) played a vital and very high-profile role in embedding new and peaceful patterns of interaction in that previously deeply divided society and is a role model for Sri Lanka. After the cowardly attack on Easter Sunday thousands of innocent Muslims were subject to racial discrimination and lived in fear. Those who committed this crime can't escape the justice of Almighty God. Sri Lankans have been divided for the past seven decades and this must stop. This island needs spiritual awakening and forgiveness from within.

People can have different political views, as we are a democracy. But division by ethnicity, religion and language must stop today. We as a prudent and resilient people must not yield to racism, because when things spiral out of control all Sri Lankans are indeed affected. I am sad to see some media institutions presenting their news and views with racial undertones. They have not realized how the Fourth Estate (the media) can influence public opinion. I also salute all Sri Lankan journalists who died (being killed) when fearlessly reporting the truth. This is a clarion call for all Sri Lankans here and overseas to reject racist politicians. At every election we see politicians coming into the esteemed Parliament on the racist ticket, elected by racist voters.

These are the folk (many unable to speak in English) who hinder the development of this once vibrant nation. Sri Lankans must learn both Tamil and Sinhalese, and importantly English. We must communicate genuinely and reach our goals together to benefit the nation. Sri Lanka is now on a victorious path to transformation and true reconciliation. May we take pride in our diversity, and stand up for what is right. We must never tolerate hate speech and racial discrimination. In fact people who behave in this uncivilized manner must be prosecuted and charged as a warning to others. We have sufficient laws in place. This is our watch; we must safeguard our Motherland from racist division.

Reconciliation is not an isolated act, but a constant readiness to leave the tyranny of violence and fear behind. It is not an event but a process. The flag must fly with freedom for all Sri Lankans. I conclude with a phrase from Mahatma Gandhi "Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilization".

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