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PROBLEMS OF COMMUNALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

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In South Asia, men and women group themselves for political action on the basis of many loyalties, but they mainly identify with one another politically along regional, ethno-linguistic, religious, caste and clan lines. These we shall consider "communal" grounds for solidarity in the broad sense. Geertz calls them "primordial sentiments" deriving from the givens of social existence.[1] They are sources of identity which can be the focus of intense loyalty. They often are the take off base for aggressive group action against others. They may be the single most important source of defensive solidarity against such assaults where competition is acute for a larger share of socio-political status, for political influence or for very scarce economic resources.

To explore these communal differences as is done here is not to find satisfaction in local differences. Rather, we seek to identify areas where creative political leadership will have to be applied if these differences are not to become sources of national weakness.

It has long been assumed that these communal affinities are to be found mainly in the least modern areas of South Asia. Yet communal outbursts in many cities of South Asia lead one to wonder whether these identifications are likely to erode as societies become more urbanized. Indeed, it may be that with rapid urbanization and the communal mixing that goes along with economic growth, communal awareness may become all the more important, as seems to be the case with contemporary ethnic politics in the United States or the re-emergence of regional sub-nationalisms in Scotland, Wales or Quebec.

Regardless of whether communal differences are bound to diminish, to be replaced by economic and class differentiations, it may be helpful to make some comparisons between problems of communalism since Independence in Sri Lanka with those of several other states in South and Southeast Asia.

We shall first compare the numerical patterns of different ethno-linguistic and religious groups in four former British territories. We shall then consider analytically a number of areas of public life where communal differences are posing difficult problems to regional leaders. The contrasting approaches the different regimes have

1. C. Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution" in his *Old Societies and States* (Glencoe, Free Press, 1963) pp. 108-109.

adopted in efforts to cope with the problems they inherited and, in some cases, have themselves exacerbated, will then be discussed along with a few generalizations about the dynamics of continued communal awareness and contention.

The Numbers: In the case of Sri Lanka, the outstanding characteristic of the communal structure is the numerical preponderance of the Sinhalese majority, comprising some 71 percent of the population. The Ceylon Tamils, for the most part resident in the island for over a thousand years, number roughly 11 percent. Though concentrated in the North and Northeast, many fill important roles in the professions, business and public service throughout the island. The Moors represent some 6 percent of the population, located mainly along the coasts and in major coastal towns. The Indian Tamils form roughly 10 percent.[2] Isolated on the estates in the hill country they were effectively disenfranchised shortly after Independence. A number of them are being repatriated each year to India; a smaller number are annually receiving Sri Lanka citizenship and are beginning to enter political life once again in a limited way via the franchise.

The pattern in Sinhalese areas has been complicated by a significant historical differentiation between low-country and up-country Sinhalese resulting from centuries of foreign rule in the low-country while the Kandyans, isolated in the hills, retained more of their semi-feudal social characteristics. In some respects this distinctiveness has diminished since Independence but in political life "up-country"—"low-country" differences remain a live issue. Each group has its spokesman within the major parties and its promoters in offices and other places where opportunities may be found. Jobs, land reform policies and resource allocations are anxiously scanned to see which of the two has done best in any particular political episode or period between elections.[3]

Present-day Pakistan's ethnic and communal structure is somewhat similar. Nearly 70 percent speak Punjabi, the bulk of them concentrated in the rich irrigated Punjab plains. Their preponderance is confirmed by their important positions in the civilian bureaucracy and army. Sindhi, the second mother tongue language, is spoken by some 14 percent, located mainly in the rural and town areas of Sindh and in Karachi city. Urdu, the official language of partitioned Pakistan is spoken by a reported 16 percent, though it represents the mother tongue of only 9 percent, over half of whom are concentrated in the Karachi area. Pushtu is the language along the mountainous frontier separating Pakistan from Iran and Afghanistan, spoken by roughly 9 percent of the people.[4] These last pose a special problem to Islamabad. The governing elite in neighbouring Afghanistan is also composed of Pushtu ethno-linguistic background and its spokesman are dissatisfied with the Durand Line frontier drawn between

2. *Statistical Abstract* [Government of Ceylon] 1967-8, pp. 32-33.
3. For careful, succinct descriptions of these and other differentiations, see B. H. Farmer, *Ceylon: A Divided Nation* (O.U.P., 1963); R. N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon* (Duke University Press, 1967). Also A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka* (London, MacMillan, 1974), Chapter 2.
4. *Census of Pakistan*, 1961. [Government of Pakistan] Statement 7-B, Section IV-46 Vol. 3.

Afghanistan and British India in 1893. They periodically stimulate dissatisfaction through calls for Pushtunistan (or Pakhtunistan), a proposed independent country of Pushtu-speakers which could only be realized at the expense of Pakistan.

Of course, prior to 1971 and the separation of Bangladesh, the sharpest differentiation was between Bengali-speakers in the "East Wing" and those others in "the West". The former represented in fact a majority of the total population of "old" Pakistan. Many communal difficulties contributed to preparing the ground for separation, including nearly all the issues identified below.[5]

In Sri Lanka, the ethno-linguistic differentiation between Sinhala-and Tamil-speakers is reinforced by the parallel cleavage between Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus. Differences between the Christians on the one hand and Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus on the other have also generated jealousies, for the former often had access to education and to opportunities which the other communities were not trained for or, during the colonial period, often were not invited to fill. Their concentration along the western coast gave them at one time a disproportionate role in political, legal, administrative and business life. In the new Pakistan, by contrast, one religion encompasses all the communities, though there are persisting differences over the proper nature of the Islamic state and the Ahamayadia minority from time to time has been the target of public hostility.[6]

In Malaysia, communal divisions lead to a 44-36-11 percent split between Malays Chinese and Indians, with Indigenes in Sabah and Sarawak representing another 8% and 'others' 2 percent.[7] While in Sri Lanka the Sinhalese preponderate numerically more decisively than does the majority community in any of the other countries, in Malaysia, the balance between the two major communities is such that each is indispensable to the well-being of the other. To be sure, some Chinese were involved in the "emergency" in the early 1950's, and the Malays' claim to represent truly indigenous national origins gives the latter an advantage of legitimacy which its numerical strength confirms. Yet the greater organizational energy, higher skill level and superior wealth of the Chinese community gives their activities a sense of deserving a larger role in public affairs than they have as yet obtained.[8] The problem is not made easier by the fact that religious cleavages parallel ethno-linguistic differences, for Malays are Muslims and the Chinese are Buddhist/Confucians.

As is to be expected, India's communal pattern is more complex. India has always been a multi-lingual and highly differentiated society, yet numerical proportions are

5. For a careful discussion of the background, see R. Jahan, *Pakistan, Failure of National Integration* (Columbia University Press, 1972).
6. The most recent outbreak occurred in June 1974. For a discussion of the background to this differentiation, see L. Binder, *Religion and Politics in Pakistan* (University of California Press, 1961).
7. Government of Malaysia, *Census* 1970.
8. Cynthia Enloe discussed this in *Multi-Ethnic Politics: The Rise of Malaysia* (Berkeley, Center for South and South East Asia Studies. Monograph No. 2, mimeo; see also Rabushka, op. cit., pp. 28-31.

important in India as well.[9] The Hindi speakers, account for only 30 percent of the total population at most, while the next four largest language groups, the Bengali speakers in the east, Marathi speakers in the west, and Telegu and Tamil-speakers in the south, represent no more than 7.5-8 percent apiece. Many other groups make up the balance.[10] In such a pluralist setting the very multiplication of innumerable groups would be likely to induce a good deal of group negotiating, a fluid formation and reformation of political coalitions directed toward group self defence and efforts to influence policy.

In sum, it is possible that the mere pattern of size and distribution of communities in any one polity will help define how leaders are likely to approach their own communal problems. But numbers in themselves are clearly not a sufficient explanation for communal relations, for different leaders have approached their cleavage problem in quite different ways. Before looking briefly at these contrasting approaches, it would be well to identify more precisely areas of public life where communal differences have posed problems to leaders and their polities.

State Organization: First in prominence, in the idiom of modern politics as Morris-Jones puts it, has been the problem of state organization.[11]

At Independence, the sub-continent was partitioned and two separate states organized on the basis of Muslim-Hindu differences. Thereafter, during the first two decades of Independence, India's leaders reluctantly redrew frontiers between a number of different states along linguistic lines, altering the structure of the Indian federation in response to linguistic communal pressures. More recently, several states have had to be partitioned in order that more ethno-linguistic communities could have "their own" states within the Federation. The very multiplicity of group pressures and the federal structure and political process mean that no one group can aspire to the degree of preponderance the Sinhalese have achieved in Sri Lanka and the Punjabis are accused of seeking in Pakistan. Moreover, since no one issue can gain full national attention at any one time, it is highly unlikely that all public forces could become crystallized around one communal issue, as occurred in Pakistan in 1970 and 1971, a development making accommodation between contending communal elements all the more difficult.[12]

Linguistic-communal pressures have forced far more drastic organizational changes in Pakistan. The most dramatic "reorganization" since the original Indo-Pakistan partition was the break-away of Bengal from Pakistan in 1971 and the setting up of two separate national states where one had existed before. How Bengali

9. R. Kothari, *Politics in India* (Boston, Little Brown, 1970), p. 322. For a subtle and profound analysis of pluralism and national integration in India see Ainslee Embree's article of that title in *Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 27, No. 1, 1973.

10. From *Census of India*, 1961 as reported in Kothari, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

11. In *Government and Politics in India* (London, Hutchinson University Library, 3rd ed. 1971, 280 pp.), Chap. 2.

12. For a discussion of this perspective in relation to India see, Myron Weiner. *The Politics of Scarcity : Public Pressures and Political Response in India.* (Chicago, 1962) *passim* and conclusion.

aspirations for independence grew so intense when Bengalis had been among the early enthusiastic proponents of Pakistan deserves much study in itself. But once such a reorganization had occurred, it has become an object lesson for other leaders in the area, though it is likely that different statesmen will draw contrary policy conclusions.

In the former West Pakistan, successive—and alternating—efforts to find an appropriate political structure suggest how intractable regional communal problems may still be there. Right after Independence, West Pakistan was organized into four provinces and a number of smaller territories in the mountainous north. Subsequently, in 1955, the four provinces were consolidated into "One Unit" to centralize administration and improve the West wing's ability to bargain with the majoritarian Bengalis. While this appeared to satisfy the leadership in Karachi and then Islamabad, it was intolerable to the principal minority communities. As a result, one of the first steps of Ayub's successors was to abolish "One Unit" and again defer to ethnic and regional particularity by re-establishing four major provinces within a formally federal political and administrative structure.[13]

Malaysia, too, had to undergo major state reorganization in the name of maintaining a tolerable ethno-linguistic balance. In the early 1960's the question arose as to whether to include Singapore in Malaya. Had the largely Chinese population of Singapore been added, the Chinese would have become a real majority. Accordingly, Sabah and Sarawak, non-Chinese in composition, were added to peninsular West Malaysia in the name of ethnic balance, and together are known as East Malaysia.[14] Singapore, brought in at the same time, subsequently was ejected from Malaysia. This reduced Malay fears that the more dynamic political leaders of Singapore would gain preponderance. But the Chinese found themselves numerically downgraded, confirming their conviction that the Malay majority was determined to maintain its political preponderance.

In Sri Lanka, there have been insistent demands by Ceylon Tamil spokesmen, for the kind of federated structure that now obtains in India and Malaysia, Ironically these aspirations were closely paralleled by appeals by up-country Sinhalese for a federal constitution put forward at the time of the Donoughmore consultations in 1929/30.[15] But no post-Independence government in Sri Lanka has been willing to undertake the structural changes such a response to ethnic imbalance would require. After all, the Sinhalese argue, Sri Lanka is very small, with only 13 million people (about the size of an Indian district). Federal structures imply costly overheads and unforeseeable political difficulties. As the Sinhalese have pressed their campaign to make Sinhalese the sole official language and Buddhism the state religion, Ceylon Tamil leaders have pressed all the harder for the kind of cultural and administrative

13. For an interesting discussion of Sindhi and other regionalisms in Pakistan, see Hafeez Malik, "Problems of Regionalism in Pakistan", forthcoming.

14. For a discussion of the politicization of East Malaysia see, Dr. Margeret Roff's *The Politics of Belonging : Political Change in Sabah and Sarawak* (O.U.P., 1974).

15. K. M. de Silva, (ed.) The University of Ceylon, *History of Ceylon* Vol. III (University of Ceylon Press Board, 1973) pp. 402-3.

autonomy a federal arrangement would allow. Some even have called for independence.[16] In turn, the very demands the Tamils have made for a federal solution have contributed to the anxieties of the more distrustful among the Sinhalese, who fear that the Tamils are really trying to partition the country. The Bangladesh experience only intensifies their worries. This matter, therefore, represents a thoroughly vicious circle.[17]

Communal differences have generated other familiar issues.

Language Competition: Debates over which language or languages shall be recognized as official have been intense and protracted. In some instances, they have been at the core of political contention, as in Sri Lanka in the 1956 election and subsequent communal riots in 1958. "Urdu only" was one of the first issues that raised doubts in the minds of Bengalis about the representative character of the government of the original Pakistan. In the new Pakistan, as recently as 1973, language disturbances broke out in Sindh over the proper scope for Sindhi in addition to the officially recognized Urdu. In Malaysia, the question of the official language has evoked more passion than any other single issue since the "emergency".[18] In India, efforts of the 30 percent of the population centred in the Gangetic Plain to make Hindi the national language have precipitated intense political protests, particularly in Dravidian language areas in the South, but also in Marathi, Bengali and other non-Hindi-speaking areas of the north.

In all these instances, language is thought to be the key to many values. It is not only the individual's mode of contact with his social world. Language is the source and expression of *his* culture, distinguishing him and his kind from all those "others". In a highly status-conscious part of the world, the position accorded to his language reflects on his own location in the society's status structure. Language is the crucial means for communicating—and evoking —a shared group awareness. It is the adhesive consolidating that sense of solidarity indispensable for exerting political leverage in political systems where the ascriptive group remains the most important basis for effective collective action.[19]

Language skills are of critical economic significance as well. In all four polities whichever language was designated as the "Official Language" usually became the language of public administration. Jobs in the public service tended to be preferred above ohers for their security, high status and opportunities for income. Accordingly,

16. For an authoritative and balanced analysis of Tamil claims and political tactics see A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, "The Tamil Federal Party in Ceylon Politics". *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies* July 1966 (Vol. IV No. 2) pp. 117-37; and his "Ethnicity, National Development and the Political Process in Ceylon", in B. Grossman, (ed). *South East Asia in the Modern World* Vol. 33 Schriften des Institute für Asienkunde, Hamburg, 1972, pp. 151-164.

17. For a discussion see S. U. Kodikara, "Communalism and Political Modernization in Ceylon", *Modern Ceylon Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1970.

18. Enloe on Malaysia, op. cit., p. 25.

19. For a further discussion of the importance of language to the individual and group approach to political life in South Asia, see the author's *Ceylon : Dilemmas of a New Nation* (Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 242-3.

when a language is made the "Official Language" great career advantages go to those for whom that language is their mother tongue. The language used in the school system, then, becomes of critical importance to ambitious parents, for the language of education determines quite decisively the range of opportunity open to their children. The extended debates and resulting decisions regarding language of instruction have, in their turn, played back into the communal situation, intensifying group self-consciousness and competitiveness.

It should be pointed out that while the ethno-linguistic cleavages are being consolidated by these processes, separating the linguistic group from another, ancient status, caste or other hierarchical cleavages within these linguistic communities are likely to become less acute. Traditional village-against-village or district-vis.-district suspicions tend to diminish in the more inclusive ethno-linguistic strife. As high status leaders seek to mobilize numerically significant lower-status groups or as several hitherto socially distant caste groups ally together to press their political fortunes, what have up till now been quasi-sacred hierarchical relationships become secularized and lose their hitherto unchangeable character. The inherited status structure may be ignored in the face of immediate political imperatives. Accordingly, from the inclusive, national or big-city view, communalism may be devisive. But seen from the village, rural district or town perspectives, newer, larger combinations may emerge within each language group, bridging hitherto unbridgeable social or Political distances in an unprecedented solidarity.

Economic Dimensions of Communalism: Communal differentiations have also been important to economic life. At Independence, it could be argued that in most parts of the economy, particular ethno-linguistic groups tended to specialize in their own specific economic activities.

In Malaysia, for example, during the colonial era, immigrant Chinese came to to man the newer economic enterprises in tin mining, rubber plantations and commerce in the towns and cities. The Malays, by contrast, preferred to continue traditional peasant pursuits while a few of their elite were recruited into the lower rungs of the British bureaucracy.[20] In India, the Marwaris were traders, entrepreneurs and eventually industrialists. Middle class educated Tamils and Bengalis were heavily represented in the public services, Gujeratis in textile manufacture. Many castes still perform economic tasks deriving from traditional caste roles, particularly in rural areas.

To be sure, these are oversimplified stereotypes, but they do suggest the ease with which economic roles are seen as reflecting communal differences. In such cases, economic competition and stratifications often intensify communal hostilities as these, in turn, intensify economic tensions.[21]

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20. I am indebted to Margeret Roff for suggestions at this point, as well as elsewhere in the discussion of Malaysia. For details see Rabushka, *op. cit.*, p. 24; and for background, William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967).

21. For qualification of this argument as it applies to Malaysia, see, C. Enloe, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-23 on "economic stratification and ethnicity"; see also, G. Ness, *Bureaucracy and Rural Development in Malaysia* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 46.

Migration: Communal awareness has generated resistance to migration. During the past five years, for example, there have been increasing protests in India against the further migration of non-Marathi speakers into Bombay or Bengalis into Assam. Other "sons of the soil" movements seek to prevent "outsiders" from migrating into "their" preserves.[22] In Pakistan's Sindh, there have been protests against the earlier influx of Urdu-speaking refugees from U.P. in India at the time of partition and more recently, the immigration of Punjabis into scarce irrigated land. Hostility to settling Biharis from Bangladesh is even more intense. In Sri Lanka, newly irrigated land in the dry zone lying between areas now inhabited by Sinhalese in the south and Ceylon Tamils in the north has become an increasingly contentious apple of discord.[23]

Caste Communalism: In India, caste plays only a small part at the federal level, but is one of the main sources of political energy in the states, where language and other communal issues are also important. Indeed, state politics cannot be understood without an awareness of the intense competition between sub-castes or *jatis*, as each group tries to improve its relative standing vis-a-vis others closest to it in the many-tiered hierarchy of sub-castes which has far more reality in political life than the traditional four-fold *varna* distinctions dear to Indologists.[24]

In Sri Lanka, too, caste stratifications remain socially and economically important, though they have been less conspicuous in political life except when party candidates are about to be chosen. However, in the 1971 youth rebellion, resentment among the *vahumpura*, *batgam*, *durāva* and *radhā* caste communities against the majority *goyigama* caste played a part in motivating that youthful uprising, and it was not entirely accidental that the leadership came mainly from the thrusting *karāva* community.[25]

Leadership Strategies: Space does not permit a detailed discussion of how these four governments have handled their many communal problems. It is often difficult to distinguish policy design from actual historical results. But certain contrasts can be quickly noted.

In both Sri Lanka and Malaysia, governments began with moderate policies reasonably responsive to the sensitivities and aspirations of the minority communities.

22. For a discussion of migration in India and reactions to it see, M. Weiner, "Socio-Political Consequences of Interstate Migration in India". in Wriggins and Guyot, *op. cit.*, Chapter 6.

23. B. H. Farmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

24. For a thoughtful discussion, see the work of Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph, particularly their *The Modernity of Tradition* (1967) and Rudolph, "The Political Role of India's caste Associations". *Pacific Affairs*, March 1960. A different view is argued by A. H. Somjee, "Caste and the Decline of Political Homogeneity". *American Political Science Review*, LXVII (3), September, 1973.

25. For details see the work of Bryce Ryan, *Caste in Modern Ceylon* (Rutgers University Press, 1953) and Janice Jiggins, *Family and Caste in the Politics of the Sinhalese*, 1947-1971 (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, 1973). For a more detailed analysis of the youth uprising, see H. Wriggins, and C. H. S. Jayawardane, "Youth Protest in Sri Lanka" in Wriggins and Guyot, *Population, Politics and the future of Southern Asia* (Columbia, 1973) Chap. 10. Compare this analysis with Wiswa Warnapala [Politicus] "The April Revolt in Ceylon", *Asian Survey* March 1972 (Vol. XII, No. 3) pp. 259-274.

In Sri Lanka by the 1950's, however, governments became far more attentive to the sense of grievance and the aspirations of the majority Sinhalese, and the Ceylon Tamil minority's position rapidly eroded. In Malaysia, too, the aspirations of the Malay majority came to play an increasingly important role at the expense of the hopes of the younger, more ambitious among the Chinese. In contrast to Sri Lanka, however, adroit political bargaining between the components of the multi-communal Alliance Party led to mutually acceptable arrangements for jobs, education and resource allocations until late in the 1960's. By 1969, this convenient arrangement seemed to have broken down when the election of that year precipitated acute ethnic rioting. Parliament was suspended for nearly two years. The outburst had seemed so threatening to spokesmen of all ethnic groups that party and parliamentary activity was resumed only after all had agreed that communal issues were *not* the proper subject of political debate and agitation.[26]

So long as spokesmen for each ethnic group were assured of their respective following, as was the case in Sri Lanka under D. S. Senanayake and, for a time, under his son Dudley, and in Malaysia with the Tunku Abdul Rahman for the Malays and his counterpart in the Chinese community, moderation made it possible for leaders to construct a more inclusive political following from both communities. But when leaders arose *within* each community to challenge the moderate men who hitherto had transcended communal differences, aspiring politicians found issues of language, religion, job defense, etc. the best ways of arousing a popular following. Such issues helped them to undercut the position of those who had worked out compromises among the communities up till then. Thus, communal conflict resulted from the political strategies aspiring leaders were tempted to use in their own rise to influence.

To be sure, competitive politics was not the sole explanation for this intensified communal consciousness. Growing literacy, a vernacular education which often recalls past periods of strife, economic growth which mixes hitherto separated communities in close working and living proximity also make their contribution. But it seems unlikely that the intensity of communal antagonisms would have been as great in either of the countries under consideration had aspiring political leaders been able to resist the temptation to play on these sensitive issues. Whether the agreed mutual self-restraint of the activists in Malaysia's numerous parties will persist without very substantial government intimidation remains to be seen. And where there is such restraint, can the grievances of the more numerous populist elements be adequately voiced in the political process?[27]

In undivided Pakistan, once the language issue was dealt with, there was a brief though confusing period of representative politics, when Bengali interests received considerable attention in the capital. Subsequently, and particularly in the latter days of the Ayub regime, Bengali grievances grew in intensity, mainly because limited

26. I am indebted to Margaret Roff for this point.

27. For more details see, H. Wriggins, "Impediments to Unity in New Nations: the case of Ceylon". *American Political Science Review* (Vol. LV No. 2, June 1961, pp. 313-321; and R. N. Kearney, *op. cit.*, C. Enloe, *op. cit.*, preface.

political processes did not provide sufficient representation for Bengali spokesmen, even though by then Bengal was receiving a substantially larger share of investment resources than had been the case before. How the federal structure in the "new" Pakistan responds to communal sentiment will depend as much on the skill and style of political leadership as on the formal allocation of resources. Electoral events in the summer of 1974 were more promising. India's communal problems require constant attention.

Those of us who know the "communal" problems of New York, Chicago, Detroit or London cannot point the finger in praise or blame. One can only hope that the steps taken today and during the next five years will be looked back upon by future generations as wise, timely and duly considered, with each country's and its constituent groups, long-run best interests held in view.