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Ethnic Parties in Multi-Party Democracies of South Asia: India and Sri Lanka in a Comparative Perspective

Arun K. Jana

Abstract

Recent times have seen a massive augmentation of the potency of ethnic power throughout South Asia. In India, the expansion of ethnic parties has affected the party system at the national level, which now manifests features of a bipolar system. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, within the last two decades, there has been a growth in the prominence of ethnic forces representing both minority and majority ethnic communities. These parties have often been credited with the consolidation and development of democracy in academic literature. Although to some extent this is true, a careful analysis reveals that some of these ethnic forces often induce conflicts in the society predominantly because some of them pursue aggressive strategies.

This paper attempts to compare the role of ethnic parties in the sustenance and promotion of democracy of India and Sri Lanka. It is argued here, that the relationship between ethnic forces and democracy should not be assumed to be a direct one. Some of these forces foster ethnic conflict. The extent of conflict they generate in a society would depend upon the ethnic composition of the society (or State in the Indian context) in which they operate, the nature of the organisational structure of the forces themselves, and the mobilisation strategy they adopt.

Keywords: ethnic parties, multi-party system, political violence, Congress system, minority interests, polarisation, majoritarianism

Arun K. Jana is Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of North Bengal, India. He obtained his MA, MPhil and PhD degrees from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and was also a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Kandy, Sri Lanka in 2005. He has contributed several articles to various journals and edited volumes apart from co-editing *Class, Ideology and Political Parties in India* (2002) and *Development and Disorder: The Crises of Governance in the Northeast and East of India* (2010). He was awarded the Manas Chatterjee award of excellence in Research on Regional Science by the Indian Regional Science Association in 2008.

The Indians in Peninsular Malaysia: Assimilation or Enculturation?

Maya Khemlani David & Ponmalar N. Alagappan

Abstract

This paper is based on a study of the Malaysian Indians within the context of the larger Malaysian society. Within the larger context of a trend toward the globalisation of cultures of the world, the paper explores the narrower dynamic of cultural accommodation of the Malaysian Indian in the Malaysian context.

The paper presents findings of research done with the main objective of ascertaining the nature of cultural assimilation experienced by Malaysian Indians in the Malaysian culture. It explores the nature of cultural assimilation (if at all) of the cultural norms and values of the larger Malay population by Malaysian Indians in Peninsular Malaysia (with the exclusion of Indian Muslims) after two centuries in the country. It also queries the extent of such enculturation, if any. The cultural norms examined in this paper include a wide range of practices and cultural artefacts encompassing *inter alia*, language, food, music and performing arts, fashion, marriage and celebration of festivals.

Keywords: Malaysian Indians, assimilation, enculturation and ethnic identity

Maya Khemlani David (Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya) received the Linguapax Award in 2007 and is an Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, United Kingdom and an Honorary Member of the Foundation of Endangered Languages. As a sociolinguist, she has a special interest in discourse analysis, languages in Malaysian minority communities, and the role of language in establishing and maintaining national unity within and across cultures.

Ponmalar N. Alagappar obtained a degree (Hons) in Psychology and minored in Anthropology and Sociology from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1992, and also has a Masters in Business Administration from Universiti Putra Malaysia in 1999. She is presently working as a lecturer in University Malaya and is pursuing her PhD in the area of organisational behaviour.

The State, the Secular and the Muslim Woman

Aysha Aseef

Abstract

A Muslim woman's choice of attire is a negotiation of a space for herself between the Muslim community and its demands, and the multi-ethnic context of Sri Lanka. It is a choice that will give her the most agency within the framework she has to work with. It is also a choice regulated by such issues as her social class, social pressure, family 'traditions' and social context. Her choice is made according to what makes her feel most comfortable in her environment and culture. This paper uses Althusser's theory of interpellation (1990), and examines the historical changes, as well as the manner in which Muslim women continue to negotiate a place for themselves within the State. Negotiating interpellation in order to interpellate herself is fundamental to a Muslim woman's identity. A Muslim woman is marked by her attire; it includes her and excludes her from certain spheres of society. Her attire announces her first as a Muslim woman; everything else about her is subordinate to that. She is a Muslim woman and not an individual. She is also a symbol of Muslim identity within the country. Interestingly it is the Muslim woman, rather than the Muslim man, who is a Muslim community marker.

This paper is constructed on the personal experiences of the author, and is therefore written in the first person, using personal references and examples. Conversations are reported verbatim from the interviews done and are therefore in the Sri Lankan idiom. The interviews with women from different social, regional and economic backgrounds offer a wide range of responses as to how they negotiate with the forces that surround them, and develop identities for themselves. The paper demonstrates how Muslim women invent

themselves as Muslim women and the manner in which they then perform that role. It also examines how comfortable or uncomfortable Muslim women are amidst mixed ethnicities, where they are looked at as the Other, and outlines the issues such a predicament would raise. The discussion on Muslim women's attire creates a space for further discussion on the wider implications of gendered ethnicity in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Muslim women, attire, intepellation

Aysha Aseef graduated from the University of Peradeniya in 2008 with an honours degree in English. Her areas of interest include culture, gender and identity.

BOOK REVIEW

Treatment of Minorities as a Yardstick of Democratic Development

Lynn Ockersz

States in Conflict With Their Minorities: Challenges to Minority Rights in South Asia, edited by Rita Manchanda, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2010, 336 pages (www.sagepub.in)

Lynn Ockersz has been a newspaper journalist over the past 30 years. He specialises in Foreign Affairs, identity-based politics and literary issues. He holds a BA Special Degree in English with Sinhala as his Subsidiary from the University of Kelaniya and also possesses a Post-Graduate Diploma in International Affairs from the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies, Colombo. He is a Press Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Cambridge.

REVIEW ARTICLE:

Religion as a Tool of Discrimination in South Asia

Vijaya Samaraweera

Ameena Mohsin, Satya Sivaraman, Saba Naveed Shaikh and Chulani Kodikara, *Religion: A Tool for Discrimination in South Asia?*, Colombo, South Asian Human Rights, 2010, 241 pages.

Vijaya Samaraweera is attached to the USAID-funded Afghanistan Civil Service Strengthening program and serves as the Senior Advisor to the Afghanistan Civil Service Institute.