

Creating a mind-set for reconciliation

Note book of Nobody

After over fifty years of worsening ethnic relations and an insurgency that has lasted for more than half that period, the task of reconciling a divided people is a monumental but not insurmountable one. Over the years, the people have been polarised by pseudo-nationalists and self-seeking politicians who have succeeded in creating a mind-set that demonised the 'other'. This mind-set, unfortunately, is not confined to those who have had no opportunity of interacting with those on the other side of the ethnic divide. One can understand the suspicion and distrust of such isolated people. But it is surprising how many, despite growing up in a multi-ethnic environment and sometimes even having close family relationships across the ethnic divide, adopt an ultra-nationalist or even a chauvinistic line. The psychologist probably has an explanation for this kind of mind-set but that is not the line to analyse in this column.

The kind of triumphalist celebrations and the personality cult that is being promoted after the defeat of the LTTE may have political motives. But it is also providing nourishment for an ugly and narrow nationalism that is hurting our country and our people. It needs to be checked before it is too late. The newspaper opinion pages, websites and the blogs give an indication of how our mind-sets have been corrupted over the years. It is a blame-game that seeks to show that all the troubles being faced by our country are caused by the 'other'. It was therefore refreshing to note some comments recently from individuals who have tried to break away from this mind-set. Mohan Sekeram, a Tamil, had sent out a private letter to friends which was picked up and published, with the author's permission, in D B S Jeyaraj's Trans-Currents website. Nazeeya Faarooq, a Muslim, wrote in the Groundviews website, and Kshama Ranawana's posting was also in the Trans-Currents web page. There have been several other well-thoughtout postings but we have selected these three, not just because they represent the three major communities in our country, but because all three were prepared to engage in self-examination and self-criticism about the failures of their respective communities. In the newspaper opinion pages, one hardly finds anyone who acknowledges the hurt that 'our community' has caused the 'other' and seeks to right the wrong done in a mood of forgiveness or repentance.

Mohan Sekeram is a former Trinity ruggerite whose family owned a tea plantation in the Maskeliya area – hardly the type who would have supported the LTTE. But he writes as one who is proud to be a Tamil. And the posting on the Trans-Currents website has attracted several comments from across the ethnic divide. Many of them have picked up Sekeram's line of thinking, acknowledge the failings of their own community, and want to move into the future by overcoming the past. This is a positive outcome of well edited web blogs like Trans-Currents and Groundviews, unlike many other websites from outside Sri Lanka that spew out partisan venom.

Us and Them

Somapala Gunadheera, a member of the once prestigious Ceylon Civil Service, has been making some excellent contributions recently on the need for understanding the 'other'

and moving towards reconciliation, to which we have referred in this column on earlier occasions. One of Gunadheera's colleagues, Dr Devanesan Nesiiah wrote a couple of years ago an excellent piece on the 'us' and 'them' mind-set which we quoted in this column. In our country's present state of mind, it is worth recalling that article. Nesiiah wrote:

"Among the many excellent offerings at Harvard in my time was one focused on group behaviour. Typically, the class was given a brief description of a development project with two options. The relative advantages and disadvantages, and the costs and benefits of the two options may be discerned from that description.

"The project may, for example, be a harbour to be constructed by the Ports Authority at either site A or site B. Lots are drawn to divide the class into groups of equal size. Group A is prescribed the task of lobbying for site A through written submissions and structured debates. Group B is prescribed the corresponding task in respect of site B. The outcome is assessed a few days later.

"As any statistician will tell us, if the class size is sufficiently large, since the assignments are on the basis of lots drawn and not by choice, it could be assumed that the two groups were initially indistinguishable in respect of social and economic policy orientation. However, almost immediately, differences emerge and quickly escalate. Passions are roused and increasing inter-group hostility is evident, even extending to social relationships. Within each group, the growing consensus is not only that the site advocated by it is superior to the other, but also that the group itself is superior to the other.

"The objective of the course was not to develop cost benefit skills but to understand how easy it is for a group to become insular or sub-divided and polarised between "us" and "them". Intra-group loyalties are very important for many purposes, but inter-group hostilities could be destructive. We are familiar with quarrels sustained over an extended period between neighbours, relatives, etc; we see fights between children of different schools, supporters of rival sports clubs, etc; we witness violent conflict based on rival political loyalties and ideologies. The wide prevalence of acute hostilities between groups based on ethnicity, language, religion, caste, citizenship, etc. suggest that the instincts dominant in our society remain tribal. Within a group sub-groups may emerge, generating more conflict. We should be ashamed that our tribal instincts are so strong, so easily aroused and so quickly displace our capacity for sound judgment and humane conduct. Cannot we overcome such destructive tribal instincts that make all of us losers?"

This tribal instinct is there in all of us and it is good for us to recognise it. Group loyalties and solidarity can be constructive and used to pursue common positive goals. But, when group solidarity is pushed to arouse passions that seek to diminish or hurt other groups, then it becomes self-destructive. It is in such circumstances, where tribal instincts are used to arouse self-destructive passions, that individuals within groups must stand up and steer the group along constructive lines, even if it means that such individuals are branded as 'traitors' to the group. Sadly, this is what our country has lacked in the past.

This can be put right if we have more Sekerams, Faarooqs and Ranawanas, who are prepared to overcome tribalism by reaching out to the ', by acknowledging that which is wrong in 'us' and that which is right in 'them'.

Nesiah is correct when he says that we should be ashamed that we allow our tribal instincts to arouse irrational passions. We allow tribalism to enter into our foreign relations as well. We accuse the West of double standards when we ourselves are guilty of double standards. We cannot remain in a cocoon and wallow in the mud of tribalism. We get nowhere by abusing and striking the West with one hand and appealing to them for financial aid with the other. If our record is clean and no civilians died from firing by the state forces during the recent offensive as now claimed, then we need have no fears of an inquiry by any independent panel. Indeed, it will show the world that we were justified in our claims.

We must not follow that line adopted by Idi Amin and Robert Mugabe. The former took his country to the depth of decadence and the latter, who began as an admired political warrior, led his country to virtual political and economic collapse. Both began as popular national heroes but it did not take long for them to emerge as fascist despots. They then tried to shift the blame for their own mismanagement by appealing to the tribal instincts of their people.

President Rajapakse must not lose the opportunity he now has of reaching out to the minorities and offering them justice and equality. He has said so but he needs to give effect to those words without delay. He now has sufficient popular backing to stand up to extremists of all types and to forge ahead with what is right by all people of this country.

Somapala Gunadheera in yesterday's The Island said much the same thing when he wrote: 'This is the time the iron of public opinion is at the hottest. It has to be struck forthwith, if we are keen to forge a consensus for national unity. ... Good governance calls for hard decisions. A good leader should have the guts to take them at the proper time. Populism is short-lived.

'Solving the ethnic problem would not call for half the valour and determination that went into the fight against the LTTE. Even if the President has to fight a battle at home to honour his word, it is worth fighting it because that battle can put an end to all wars that would inevitably follow otherwise.'

Source: Shanie, The Island Online Features