In search of nation in flag-waving, anthem-singing times

By Malinda Seneviratne

A nation need symbols. Flags and anthems for example. They are supposed to capture things that are unmistakably ‘national’. Things that make a particular polity in a particular geography unique.

They must, therefore, reflect not just the surface that is ‘today’, but the depths that are contained in the ‘yesterday’ that brought this ‘today’ and hopefully point to a realistic tomorrow.

The current debate about language pertaining to the national anthem, to my mind, is useful only in terms of seeing it as an invitation to return to the debate on who we are; a debate that includes the following questions:

Who were we? Where did we come from? Who were our ancestors? What did they do? What philosophical traditions were the most prominent in persuading the unfolding of event and creating of artifact, physical and otherwise, in particular ways? Where do we want to go? Reducing the issue to a ‘today’ and pandering to the misleading and indeed obfuscating rhetoric flowing from that nonsensical notion, ‘one-ethnicity = one vote’ flowing from the once again misleading and un-nuanced phrase ‘multi-ethnic, multi-religious’ is nothing more than playing power politics.

One must never go overboard with anything, particularly representation. That would require us to make sure a) that all groups (religious, ethnic, gender, age etc) represented in appropriate percentages and b) periodically alter the relevant pie charts in accordance to changing demographic data. It is no easy task of course. All the more reason to remind ourselves that what is more important is not symbol but what it is supposed to represent. A nation with national flag and national anthem but sans a national ethos is patently hollow.

This is not to say that we are not a people with no national sense of course. If that were the case, we would be still fighting the war against terrorism. Still, it is not incorrect to say that nationalism is more latent than apparent. If our nationalism is limited to safeguarding the dimensions of a map we are poor indeed, especially in a global context where national boundaries are porous when it comes to things economic and indeed cultural.

I believe we should inhabit the national flag and anthem just as much as these things ought to inhabit us.

What does ‘nation’ mean if we do not acknowledge the existence of one another, if we do not celebrate the triumphs of our fellow-citizen and commiserate in his/her sorrow? What would our nationalism mean if we cannot stand by our fellow citizen in his distress even when he/she is in error and deserving of admonishment? What would our nationalism mean if we choose not to criticize his error?

We are lesser nationalists if we cannot celebrate the fact that a Sri Lankan Catholic priest was made a Cardinal, clearly a personal honour to him and his flock.

We are lesser nationalists if we fail to note that he was in error when he pandered to Eelamist myths when making submissions to the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission and that he fudged with respect to the role of the Catholic church vis-à-vis the Eelam Project.

We are lesser nationalists if we choose to look the other way when a place of religious worship is desecrated and lesser nationalists when we do not acknowledge the deliberate attempts to downplay the role of particular philosophies and attendant religious traditions in the making of a civilization and indeed a nation.

There is no nationalism in avowing a multi-ethnic, multi-religious Sri Lanka while at the same time ignoring the fact that those who belonged to a particular ethnicity and subscribing to a particular set of religious practices perished in greater numbers and suffered more depravations and desecration in the 500 years under colonial rule and even thereafter so that we have the national flag and national anthem we quarrel over today.

What is our nationalism if we do not see neighbour, if we do not see community, if we do not respect his/her religious convictions, if we confer ‘heathenism’ and seek to purchase emancipation? What is our nationalism if we do not understand that certain structures and processes favour a few and trip the rest? What is our nationalism if we do nothing to correct structures but instead seek to people them with our friends (if we ourselves cannot occupy the high seats within)? What is our nationalism if we are fixated with ‘demand’ and ‘right’ and have dragged

‘responsibility’ to the trashcan and emptied it thereafter?

We are not a nation if we cannot see our warts.

We are not a nation if we see only the warts.

We are not a nation if we see flag and anthem and not the nation they are supposed to be symbols of.

We can do without flag and anthem, but we would not be nation if we are not nationalists in the most comprehensive and most embracing understandings of the term.

We are not a nation worthy of that name if we object to one enemy but not another.

We are not a nation if we pick the easy fight.

We are not a nation if we cannot see that not all the nation’s enemies have foreign passports.

We cannot be the nation that we can legitimately aspire to be given the strong philosophical and civilisational foundations laid down by our ancestors if we do not consciously and frequently engage in self-reflection and self-criticism.

There are questions we need to ask ourselves.

What kind of nation are we? What kind of nation do we want to be? Ignoring these and indulging in the easy business of quarreling over flag and anthem is being crassly political. Not something to be proud of.

The nation does not reside in flag or anthem, in identity card or birth certificate. It exists outside of all these things and, one can argue, in spite of them.

It does not come shouting and that’s a good thing, for if that were the case it is more than likely that it would either be destroyed or purchased.

That’s the nation we must seek, I believe, as individuals and as a colourful collective, warts and all.

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