

Geography is thicker than blood: northern and eastern Tamil difference in context

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The difference between Northern (Jaffna) Tamils and Eastern (Batticaloa) Tamils has always been there at varying intensities. This difference was thought to have been completely obliterated under the overwhelming power of Tamil nationalism in general and LTTE's extremist and exclusive "eelan" ideology and its unforgiving intolerance towards any form of dissent. However the conflict within LTTE on the basis of Geography fundamentally shattered first the theoretical dictate that ethnonationalism is the most fundamental identity giving its an aura of inevitability second the belief of monolithic Tamil national identity.

A prominent geographer once argued that we cannot legislate against geography. Sooner or later geography will defeat legislations that defied former. Not only one cannot legislate against geography, one cannot suppress geography through nationalist ideologies, threat and intimidation and terrorism. Geography is profound in social and political life of people. Even extremist nationalism is subject to the profound gravity of geography. But Sri Lankan historians and political scientists who have denigrated geography simply as length of rivers and height of mountains, failed to see the socio-political causation generated by geography that could have profound impacts on the history, society, culture and politics. The time has come for Sri Lankan social scientists both within and outside universities and the so called international experts on Sri Lanka to take basic lessons in geography and also to read recent social theory which argues for place specificity in social analysis as amply discussed by Anthony Giddens.

Ethnonationalist studies in general and those on Sri Lanka have been entrenched in nationalist ideology through the uncritical acceptance of the existence of a monolithic nation. In this context, a more appropriate engagement of monolithic nation which has overwhelmed nationalist historiography in general and that of Tamil ethnonationalism in particular requires us to turn inward by digging deeper into actual ethnonationalist politics. The task of this paper is precisely that. The paper examines how and why geographical identity came to challenge Tamil national identity. The paper traces the history of the geographical uniqueness and how it became both a cause and effect in its own definition and manifestation.

The conclusion arrived at in this paper is that monolithic view of Sri Lankan Tamil ethnonationalism as projected by Tamil ethnonationalist leaders and Tamil intellectuals is not supported by ground realities. Jaffna and Batticaloa are two different Tamil localities with their own specific and unique socio-economic, cultural and political histories giving rise to competing needs and aspirations as amply proved by the heightened difference between the two regions when it was expected to be completely obliterated under the power of monolithic Tamil nationalism. Only the reverse became a reality. Geography is indeed thicker than blood.