

### **National Integration – A salad or a sambol?**

A question of historical importance for today's social scientists is to conceptualize a mechanism by which different ethno-religious groups of our country could be brought together to form a unique Sri Lankan national identity. First mooted by Professor Nalin de Silva, this idea of national integration, seem to have gathered some momentum during the recent past. Clearly the question is not how different groups could simply live together in harmony but how all such groups could be integrated into one nation. Although science does not tell you why things happen, it could tell you how (mechanism by which) things happen. Therefore this is a legitimate question for the serious social scientist. Here I argue that certain limitations in the scientific world view will fail scientists from satisfactorily conquering this problem.

In spite of the introduction of quantum mechanics in the early nineteen hundreds, majority of practicing scientists still view the world and work with classical Newtonian mechanics. The methodology of classical mechanics is to reduce complex systems to the interactions of its constituents. This methodology has found applications not only in hard sciences like Physics but in Sociology as well. There, scientists try to explain social changes in terms of the actions of individuals. It can be argued, at least in principle, that social dynamics of different ethno-religious groups can be modeled by the interactions between individuals of the two groups. Although scientists could determine, a priori, the different ethno-religious characteristics of individuals in the model by field surveys, there is no social scientific theory as to how and why such difference comes about. That is, among the system of rules that governs the model, there is no rule that relate individual characteristics to their culture. Such characteristics are not “self evident” but “god given” in classical mechanics. This limitation is seen in Newtonian mechanics as well.

Newton's laws are valid to observers residing in what is known as inertial frames of reference that moves in constant velocities in absolute space. The laws of classical mechanics are the same in all such frames, a fact that some arrogantly characterize as the universality of science. However, on the flipside, no experiment conducted within such a reference frame can determine the velocity of that reference frame or the observer. This is important because in a world of “motion”, the velocity is the unique identity given to each observer. In the classical mechanical view there is no theory that connects the observer to its own velocity-identity.

This limitation is not a direct result of the reductionist method but an inherent feature of the classical mechanical view. In the early 1930s, Austrian mathematician Kurt Gödel formally recognized this feature in his theorem of incompleteness. He demonstrated that within a system of rules there would always be some “truths” that couldn't be determined using the rules and axioms of that system itself. Although his proof of the theorem was strictly applied to elementary mathematics, the implications of the theorem have been used in other areas of academic interest. In the present context, the aforementioned social scientific model would be incomplete because there is no theory within the model that determines one's social and cultural characteristics according to one's ethno-religious identity. If the model were to be implemented as a computer simulation, such

characteristics will be assigned by the scientists to the model's individuals. These characteristics will be modified by external forces but individuals will not be able to modify (or not modify) them inherently since there is no theory to implement it in the model. The dynamics of such a model will be modulated primarily by the forces of the dominant culture. Over time, the characteristics of a mixture of individuals from different ethno-religious groups will result in a distribution that is not decomposable into different groups. Translated to real life, what this means is: barring outside influence, there will be peace and harmony but the society will be essentially a mono culture with different traits assigned to people as mere symbols. Like starting with a salad of multi flavored greens and ending up with a salad of just one flavor, a salad nevertheless.

Incompleteness is inherent to the classical mechanical view. Thus, social sciences and the liberal politics that follow classical mechanical view are not sophisticated enough to bring cultures together and still maintain a diversity in the society. This world view will result in a mere mix of people whose cultural differences are only skin deep; a salad not a *sambol*, as evident in major cities of western countries where people of different ethnicities live together. In fact, liberal politics, in spite of its benevolent appearance, may even regard cultural consciousness as an impediment to integration rather than a blessing. It is not a coincidence that the man who uttered "...we no longer see others who are different as being deficient. We just see them as different", Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and his word didn't find comfort within the current US political environment.

Cultural diversity strengthens the integrity of a nation and the creativity of its people. Certainly, mono cultures have been proven to be disastrous for biological systems and if recent world wide economic melt down prove anything it is that mono cultural economies are bad too. Cultural consciousness should not threaten peaceful coexistence. Sinhals and Thamils should aspire for a nation where they can be integrated like in a *sambol* but without foregoing their ethnic and religious consciousness because only then will we gain true cultural diversity. Yes we can do it; but only in a world view where knowledge itself is viewed to be culture dependent and not universal.

"For Buddhism, religious tolerance is not achieved by reducing all religions to a common denominator, nor by explaining away formidable differences in thought and practice as accidents of historical development. From the Buddhist point of view, to make tolerance contingent upon whitewashing discrepancies would not be to exercise genuine tolerance at all; for such an approach can "tolerate" differences only by diluting them so completely that they no longer make a difference" –Bhikku Bodhi, Tolerance and Diversity, Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter, no. 24, 1993.

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