

The Threat to Our Way of Life

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A way of life has more to do with human relationships between people than what is typically identified as their cultural characteristics. A culture can be studied, imitated or even absorbed while a way of life must be experienced by living it. Therefore in general a way of life could be thought of as a holistic measure of a nation. We have inherited a unique way of life from our forefathers. It is a life of simplicity, modesty and contentment often expressed as “නිවි සැකසිල්ලේ ජීවත්වෙමු”. Despite decades long effort to westernize our economy, agriculture is still the main livelihood of majority of our people thus the phrase “ගොවිතැන් බතක් කරගෙන ජීවත්වෙමු” is another common example of our desire to live a simple, less materialistic life. However a way of life is not just what people do for living or in their spare time. It is intimately associated with how people relate to each other, to the greater society and to the environment they live in. For instance, the attitude expressed in the nursery rhyme “මේ ගසේ බොහෝ” is not a mere depiction of personal character of moderation but an indication of our altruistic attitude towards the society that flows from the very relationships we make with it. They are concepts that have been passed down to us through generations and not some romantic ideas about life that has been made fashionable by the mass media, as it often does. It is also significantly important that most of us can articulate profoundly and consistently about the virtues of our way of life without ever being formally instructed. That is we did not become aware of the “facts” about our way of life owing to some sociological or any other such “research”. We are inherently and acutely conscious of it and we are emotionally attached to it.

A way of life is the embodiment of the nation’s Jathika Chinthanaya. In general, a nation is formed when a majority of people assimilate into the same way of life. It is the dynamic process that binds nation’s people, world view, economics, and etc together. The history and the demographics of our nation dictate that we derive our Jathika Chinthanaya and therefore our way of life distinctly from Sinhala Buddhism. Weakening of the state and marginalizing the majority Sinhala Buddhist culture that contribute significantly to its character and progression are two major factors that threaten the way of life of our nation. We experience these threats today.

For Sinhala Buddhists, their culture and their way of life are the same. In building the nation, other ethno-religious groups have come to share the same way of life but without necessarily being absorbed into the Sinhala Buddhist culture. For instance, Hindu Tamils have not nor are they coerced to become Buddhists or Sinhalas in culture in order to assimilate and contribute to our way of life. Sinhala Catholics for instance are comfortable leading a Sinhala Buddhist way of life while being devout Catholics. It is the characteristics that we derive from this unique way of life that give us a unique Sri Lankan identity. It is what makes a Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu, Catholic, Muslim or even a Buddhist different from their counter parts in the rest of the world. This Sinhala Buddhist way of life is what makes even the most anti Buddhist, westernized Sri Lankan different from his rich cousins in the west.

Assimilating into the way of life without fully assimilating to the majority culture is possible only if a nation could achieve a delicate balance between individuality and collectivity. We have managed to achieve just that. This balance allows a higher degree of tolerance for diversity of cultures in our society compared to in a society that promotes either individuality or collectivity. In an individualist society, individual cultural characteristics dictate the way of life of that society. On the other hand, in a collectivist society the way of life dictates the culture of its people. Therefore both in an individualist and a collectivist society a common way of life equates to common culture of its people. This is quite apparent in the highly individualist western society. In spite of large ethnic variety in some major cities, there is no diversity in active cultures except in few enclaves isolated from the main society. The so called multiculturalism in the west is necessarily limited to the consumption and exhibition of different

cultural symbols while being absorbed into the majority Judeo-Christian Culture. One should not confuse different “*life styles*” (often bought at the nearest super market) with cultural diversity. A man voluntarily practicing a frugal life in the west is merely following a *life style* (sustained by the western way of life and allowed by personal liberty) and is not living a Sri Lankan way of life. It is important to understand this difference.

Sinhala Buddhist way of life takes a middle path between these two extremes: individualism and collectivism. This middle ground is what gives rise to peaceful coexistence of different cultures in our society. Liberal and Marxist forces, on the other hand, work to drive us towards either individualism or collectivism respectively. While these extremists recognize the existence of multi-ethnic cultures in Sri Lanka (they do so to marginalize Sinhala Buddhist culture) they cannot conceptualize the underlying mechanism that allows it. So they work to bring down the very foundation of our way of life.

This unique balance between individualism and collectivism is also what creates a harmony between individuals, society and the environment. It helps sustain a peaceful, simple and gratifying way of life by acting as the homeostatic mechanism between these elements. **This balance comes about because of the emotional attachments we make with other individuals, the society and the environment and not just through logical reasoning.** It is important to note this fact. Fortunately, Sri Lankans in general do not give undue importance to rationalism. Buddhists in particular know that Nirvana is not something that can be conceptualized or reasoned. Therefore we do not consider deductive reasoning as the only way to create knowledge. For us, mindful attachment is also a valid and legitimate means of creating knowledge.

The West exerts force on our culture to rid of these attachments so that it could make inroads into our way of life. One *modus operandi* of their's is to portray “emotion” as an uncivilized trait as Charles Darwin had tried to show us a century ago. The other method is to make us believe that these emotional attachments are “irrational”. One has to be a human in order to become civilized so we could disregard the former, but the latter needs some serious thought. Whether emotional attachments can be rationalized is questionable; but even if so the West reasons with the two-fold logic. Ironically, Quantum Physics, the most advanced of all western sciences, has so far failed to understand the concept of *measurement* with this two-fold logical reasoning. A physical measurement is a primary mode of knowledge creation. An attachment that mind makes with a thought is a much more complicated mode of knowledge creation. The Western scientific method has failed to conceptualize the former. It is clearly inadequate to grasp the latter. Physicists have known this shortcoming for a long time; it is the lesser scientists who arrogantly cling to rationalism.

There is no validity to the claims of irrationality. The emotional attachment we have with other human beings, the greater society and the environment forms the basis of our way of life. In trying to create an individualist society, extremists act to separate these elements. That is the most fundamental threat to our way of life.