

## THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR

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**Abstract.** *The present study approaches the hypothesis according to which, the cultural factor played a very important role in shaping the perspective on the conflict of both Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Sri Lankan civil war opposed, for nearly three decades, the Sri Lankan government, dominated by the Buddhist Sinhalese main ethnic group, to the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), a separatist group fighting for an independent state in the north-east of the island, mostly inhabited by Hindu Tamils. Both perceptions were reactive phenomena and, at the same time, both of them made the war seem legitimate. The present study conviction is that, with two such different points of view on the war polarizing the society, understanding and meeting the “other”, seems to be a promising step towards ethnic reconciliation.*

**Keywords:** *Civil War, Sri Lanka, Sinhalese, Tamil, Ethnic Reconciliation.*

The Sri Lankan civil war “is arguably the world’s most deadly secessionist conflict”, says Neil De Votta.<sup>1</sup> It opposed, for nearly three decades, the Sri Lankan government, dominated by the Buddhist Sinhalese main ethnic group, to the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), a separatist group fighting for an independent state in the north-east of the island, mostly inhabited by Hindu Tamils.

Facts remain the same to impartial observers of the war, but this is not the case of the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Their cultural beliefs built their own reality and reflect on the interpretation that people gave to events. It led to two parallel narratives on why the war burst and what it was about. Therefore this material focuses on the Sinhalese and the Tamil points of view and aims at illustrating two different yet interesting perspectives shaped by culture.

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<sup>1</sup> DeVotta, N., “Control Democracy, Institutional Decay, and the Quest for Eelam: Explaining Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka” in *Pacific Affairs*, University of British Columbia, vol. 73, no. 1, 2000, pp. 55-76.

### *The “Sinhalese” Point of View*

The Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology has associated the Sinhalese ethnicity with the Buddhist religion and has reinterpreted the history of the island, making Sinhalese people believe that Sri Lanka is a country for Buddhism and Sinhalese and it's their duty to preserve it as such. The Mahavamsa and the interpretations that monks and politicians gave to it have largely contributed to this way of thinking. A direct consequence of it was seeing the Tamils as South Indian intruders.<sup>2</sup>

A series of declarations of Sinhalese leaders have massively encouraged the Sinhalese majority of the island to believe this and act accordingly. We will present below a few of these declarations and try to analyze them.

In 1982, the Minister of Industries – Cyril Mathew – declared:

“The link between the Sinhala race and Buddhism is so close and inseparable that it led to the maxim. There is no Buddhism without the Sinhalese and no Sinhalese without Buddhism. This is an undeniable fact. The literature of the Sinhalese is Buddhist literature. The history of the Sinhalese is the history of Buddhism. The language of the Sinhalese is enriched by the doctrine of the Buddha. The era of the Sinhalese is the Buddha era. The culture of the Sinhalese is Buddhist culture. The flag of the Sinhalese is the Sinhala Buddhist flag.”<sup>3</sup>

This declaration shows that Buddhist religion has shaped very much the perception of the Sinhalese. The leader implies that a Sinhalese is Buddhist by definition and strongly insists in associating the two notions by repeating them in every sentence. There is also an extensive use of the verb “to be”, strategically placed to assure the audience that “Sinhalese” and “Buddhists” are equivalents, much like the two sides of the same coin.

It is a paradox that such a pacifist religion, which intensely promotes tolerance, has contributed to ethnocentrism and ultimately militarism. Neil DeVotta tried to explain this paradox.

Unlike other faiths, Buddhism does not focus on a monopoly of truth, encouraging its followers to show compassion and respect to people of other faiths instead. It is a religion strongly connected to the principle of non-violence. Still, according to the author, in Sri Lanka, Buddhist myth-history has been used by monks and politicians to support violence and justify anti-minority feelings and behaviors. In 1947, monk Walpola Rahula published an article claiming monks could participate in the political life and implying they had already done so along the history. It was a foundation overlapping Buddhist values over political ones, manipulating religion for political purposes.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hennayake, Shantha, “The Peace Accord and the Tamils in Sri Lanka” in *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, vol. 29, no 4, 1989, pp. 401-415.

<sup>3</sup> Sinhala Buddhist Ethno Nationalism, retrieved on 25.03.2013 from <http://tamilnation.co/tamileelam/fundamentalism/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> DeVotta, Neil, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka*, East-West Center Washington, Washington D.C., 2007, p. 2.

Another declaration which had a great impact on the Sinhalese community belongs to Minister Gamini Dissanayake, who, in the aftermath of the riots against Tamils of July 1983, said:

“Who attacked you? The Sinhalese. Who protected you? The Sinhalese. It is we who can attack and protect you. They are bringing an army from India. It will take 14 hours to come from India. In 14 minutes, the blood of every Tamil in the country can be sacrificed to the land by us.”<sup>5</sup>

By declaring this, the minister encouraged the Sinhalese community to think that Tamils are inferior to them. That their existence on the island depends on the mercy Sinhalese show to them. Of course, this perspective damaged a great deal to the Sinhalese-Tamil relations.

In a television interview in 1998, President Chandrika Kumaratunga stated:

“They (the Tamils) want a separate state – a minority community which is not the original people of the country.”<sup>6</sup>

The key word of this declaration is “original”. For the Sinhalese, it is primordial to specify that they arrived first on the island; therefore they are the “original” race of Sri Lanka. It is, consequently, hard to conceive how a minority which has afterwards migrated from South India could be entitled to claim a part of their land.

This ideology was fueled also by the Mahavamsa, or the Great Chronicle, which claims that the ancestors of the Sinhalese were the first on the island and justifies the “chosen ones” or “sons of the soil”<sup>7</sup> status many Sinhalese embraced. The past has been explored to justify present and future actions of Sinhalese leaders and the interpretation given to the history has deepened ethnic tensions. Even though many Sinhalese have not read the chronicle, it has a great collective influence and Sinhalese people identify with it. The Mahavamsa provides the following myth on the origin of Sinhalese on the island: the prince Vijaya arrived in the island together with 700 followers after being exiled by his father from the kingdom of Vangas. As for Vijaya’s origin, the Great Chronicle claims he is the nephew of a lion which supposedly stole away the daughter of the king of Vangas and had a boy and a girl with her. The boy killed his father – the lion, and married his sister. They had two sons as well, one of them being Vijaya.<sup>8</sup> This myth entitles the Sinhalese to consider themselves “people of the lion”. A lion appears on the current flag of the country. Vijaya’s and Kuveni’s descendents are considered the aborigines of the island.

Apparently the prince landed in Sri Lanka on the day Buddha died, indicating that the country was meant to be a sanctuary for Theravada Buddhism. The Chronicle also affirms that Lord Buddha visited the island three times. While

<sup>5</sup> Sinhala Buddhist Ethno Nationalism, retrieved on 26.03.2013 from <http://tamilnation.co/tamilceelam/fundamentalism/index.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> DeVotta, Neil, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> The Mahavamsa – The Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka, composed in the late 5th or early 6th century CE, by Ven. Mahanama Thera, translated by Wilhelm Geiger (1912), pp. 51-61, *apud*.

many argue this document is biased and was written to deliberately imply that Sri Lanka is the island of Buddhism, for many Sinhalese chauvinists it has become a reputed historical reference. The myth is also taught in schools, influencing Sinhalese children.<sup>9</sup>

Another myth explored by Buddhist nationalists is a battle which took place in the second century BC when king Duttagamani, the Sinhalese son of a southern ruler, attacked and killed king Elara, whose origins were traced in South India (same origin as Tamils). Whether true or an exaggeration of Mahanama, the author of the Mahavamsa, the supposed battle was used to imply that the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka had started two millennia ago. Apart from the ethnicity of the two kings, other details have been emphasized as well: Duttagamani went to war carrying a relic of Buddha and accompanied by 500 monks. After the battle, when the Sinhalese king regretted killing thousands of people, the disciples of Buddha told him this: “Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken unto himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from the heart, O ruler of men.”<sup>10</sup> This myth implies that non-Buddhists are less than human and justifies wars carried by the Sinhalese against them if that is what it takes to protect and preserve the Buddhist doctrine. After the LTTE was defeated, president Rajapaksa was compared to Duttagamani, which shows us that heroes of the Mahavamsa are still present in the minds of the Sinhalese and they are looking for equivalents.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to specify that Buddhist Sinhalese nationalism is a reactive phenomenon. The island did not reflect its religious composition until Christian missionaries were brought by the colonizers. Buddhist revival was a response to the inconsiderate attitude missionaries had against Buddhists. Anagarika Dharmapala (or the Homeless Guardian of the Doctrine) played an important role in the process in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He blamed Sinhalese Buddhists who accepted the British influence and adopted European customs and traditions and developed a racist attitude towards anything different to the Sinhalese culture. On the one hand, he influenced greatly the Sinhalese towards appreciating their cultural heritage; on the other hand, he created the context for ethnocentrism in post-colonial Sri Lanka.<sup>12</sup>

Another reason which might justify the post-independence behavior of Buddhist Sinhalese nationalists is the “threat” they perceived from the surroundings. Being surrounded by 60 million Hindu Tamil in the South of India and Muslims in the close-by states, the majority developed a complex of minority, feeling insecure

<sup>9</sup> DeVotta, Neil, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> The Mahavamsa – The Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka, *op.cit.*, pp. 160-161, *apud*.

<sup>11</sup> Sarvan C. P., Duttthagamani vanquishing Tamils and Rajapaksa defeating Tamils, retrieved on 30.03.2013 from <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/4742>.

<sup>12</sup> DeVotta, Neil, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

and willing to defend themselves: “We are carrying on a struggle for national existence against the Dravidian majority...If the Tamils get hold of the country, the Sinhalese will have to jump in the sea.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, after the independence of 1948, the Sinhalese fought to regain what they considered to be rightfully theirs – supremacy over the island. They felt that their culture had been marginalized and that they had been underrepresented in the public structures of the state. Restoring the Sinhalese identity became synonymous with imposing their religion and language, and this justifies the Sinhala Only Act and introducing Buddhism as the main religion in the Constitution. From the point of view of the Sinhalese, this meant taking back what it belonged to them and was stolen by the British and given to the Tamils.

Of course, not every single Sinhalese felt like this and shared this perspective, but unfortunately the moderates have been disempowered by the extremists on the way. The latter were definitely more vocal and had a significant contribution to making the ethnic conflict intractable.

### *The “Tamil” Point of View*

Tamil nationalism and desire to build an independent state of Eelam developed around several sentiments.

A feeling which has largely increased separatist views was discrimination. Post-independence Sinhalese political decisions gave Tamils the impression that they were no longer seen and treated as an equal actor of the island, which had happened during colonialism, but reduced to a minority status. Unsurprisingly, this transition was not taken very well by Tamils. Their decreasing number in governmental positions and universities was a major cause of discontent. Later, when Sinhala was designated the official language of the country and Buddhism was given superior status in the Constitution, Tamils felt even more disregarded and marginalized. Moreover, Sinhalese settlement projects in the eastern coast were described as “an invasion of the Tamil homeland.”<sup>14</sup>

A Tamil reaction was imminent. A coalition of all Tamil parties was created, militating for their community’s civil rights and claiming that “It is a regrettable fact that successive Sinhalese governments have used the power that flows from independence to deny us our fundamental rights and reduce us to the position of a subject people. These governments have been able to do so only by using against the Tamils the sovereignty common to the Sinhalese and the Tamils” (Declaration of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, leader of TULF, 1975).<sup>15</sup> We can infer that, for Tamil political leaders, the separatist movement was a reactive phenomenon to the

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, Michael, “Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Perspectives: Barriers to Accommodation” in *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 12, 1978, p. 367, *apud*.

<sup>14</sup> Hennayake, Shantha, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Tamil Eelam: Right to Self Determination, retrieved on 02.04.2013 from <http://tamilnation.co/selfdetermination/tamileelam/7504sjvstatement.htm>.

“subject” position Sinhalese had placed them in. Much as the Sinhalese, they considered it was their responsibility to take back what it was “fundamentally” theirs. A separate Tamil state was necessary because the Sri Lankan state, under Sinhalese dominance, was “against” them.

All these political decisions taken by a government of majorly Sinhalese ethnicity and Buddhist religion gave birth to another feeling: fear. Tamils became afraid that, more than their civil rights, their Tamil values, customs and traditions were in danger:

“Though the Tamils and Sinhalese have lived in this country for over two thousand years, yet the Tamils have continued to preserve their individual culture based on their language. This culture and the traditions were nurtured even under Portuguese, Dutch and British imperialistic rule. The vital reason behind this survival was that even though the Tamils in Eelam were not strong in numbers, yet they never lost the opportunities of maintaining close bonds with the powerful fountain of Tamil culture across the Park Strait, in Tamil Nadu, South India. (...) In recent times, the government of this country not only imposed several restrictions on the import of cultural works, literature, quality films etc. from Tamil Nadu but also put obstacles to the visits of Tamil scholars and artists from Tamil Nadu. By the government policy of imposition of the Sinhala language several Sinhala words like poya, pola, laksala, salusala are creeping into the Tamil language in Eelam. With the curtailment of links with Tamil Nadu, on the one hand and the increasing tempo of Sinhala imposition on the other, Tamil language will undergo strange transformation and the identity of the Tamil culture will be destroyed and finally the Tamil Nation itself would disappear from this island.” (General Election Manifesto of TULF, 1977).<sup>16</sup> The Manifesto portrays explicitly the perception of Tamils in regards to their position on the island. The Sinhalese are described as the “oppressor”, whereas Tamil Nadu from India is seen as the “guardian”. The entire Tamil culture seems to be at stake. Also, the language is considered to be the mechanism which has kept alive the Tamil culture and has perpetuated it over the centuries. In this context, the Sinhala Only Act is perceived as a major threat to the survival of Tamil heritage. Implicitly, this mechanism needs to be defended from Sinhala influence – “Sinhala words are creeping into the Tamil language”. The verb used – “creeping” – suggests that Sinhala linguistic influence is an intruder, a strange object in the Tamil body, a virus which corrupts the purity of Tamil language. The manifesto is a statement for the defense of Tamil language, but also of cultural ties with Tamil Nadu – “a powerful fountain of Tamil culture.” The governmental banning of cultural exchanges with them is perceived as an act against Tamil cultural survival in Sri Lanka. Without its “guardian”, Tamil culture is weaker in front of its “oppressor”. Alienated from Tamil Nadu and under the “increasing tempo of Sinhala imposition”, the Manifesto predicts a catastrophic destiny for Tamil culture in Sri Lanka: destruction and extinction.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.



An immediate outcome of the fear was the feeling of responsibility to protect the Tamil cultural heritage. Sri Lankan Tamils are very proud of their tradition in the island. It is important to specify that they are also called Ceylon Tamils and are a different group from the Indian Tamils brought to the island by the British to work on plantations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The previous group however has shared a long history with the Sinhalese and strongly believed it was their right to defend their culture from extinction at all costs.

The solution imagined by Tamil separatists was the creation of a new state – “Eezham” (Eelam in English) – which is the Tamil word for the island of Sri Lanka. The exact etymology of the word and its original meaning are not very clear though and there are several theories on the matter. It seems that the term was used first in a Tamil Brahmi inscription and in the Changkam literature around 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. The inscription Thirupparang-kun’ram denominates a person as “owner from Eelam”. The Paddinappaalai of Changkam literature refers to “the food of Eelam”. This proves that, besides the geographical identification of the island, the word stood as well for the ethnicity and culture of Tamil people coming from the island, differentiating them from those of nowadays Tamil Nadu. Still, later the word became relevant for any person of the island, despite its ethnicity.<sup>17</sup> Since 1980, it referred to the future citizens of the state of Tamil Eelam. This state included the northern and the eastern parts of the island and, even though it was not recognized by any country in the world, it was a de facto state under the control of the LTTE until the organization was defeated.

Bryan Pfaffenberger has approached the “restoration and reconstruction” of Tamil Eelam and the cultural dimension of the process. According to the author, the political measures taken against Tamils exacerbated the will of separatism; still, a central issue of it remains culture. He explains that Sri Lankan Tamils see their culture as unique, different to a certain extent in customs and patterns from South Indian Tamils. More than mainland Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils believe they are the ones who preserve the essence of their civilization, because they follow the best the ancient ways in matters of caste, female chastity and relations with the Brahmins. This uniqueness increases to an even larger scale, in their eyes, their responsibility. Not only Sri Lankan Tamils preserve Tamil culture better than South Indian Tamils, but at the interior of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, a special emphasis is made on Jaffna Peninsula, considered to be particularly rigorous.<sup>18</sup>

The writer points out to the Vellalar caste of Jaffna, stating that “the customs that Tamil separatists feel so much responsibility to preserve are ones that very few Ceylon Tamils reject, but at the same time they figure directly in the ideological and social foundations of Vellalar supremacy in the Jaffna Peninsula and refer, moreover, to Vellalar suzerainty in the most ancient form.”<sup>19</sup> From this point of

<sup>17</sup> Akazhaan, Eezham Tamizh and Tamil Eelam: Understanding the terminologies of identity, retrieved on 02.04.2013 from <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=27012>.

<sup>18</sup> Pfaffenberger, Bryan, “The Cultural Dimension of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka” in *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, vol. 21, no 11, pp. 1147-1148.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1149.

view, it can be considered that Tamil separatists were aiming at the reconstruction of the pre-colonial kingdom of Jaffna, a state controlled by the Vellalars which existed in the Peninsula from the 13<sup>th</sup> century until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Portuguese conquered it.<sup>20</sup>

### *Understanding the “Other” – a Path to Ethnic Reconciliation*

As shown in the previous pages, Sinhalese and Tamil communities did not share the same perspective and developed two incompatible versions of the same story. The very concept of “peace” was perceived in a different manner as well during the war, since “peace for the Tamils is that the army should get out of the North and East. Peace in the south might be LTTE surrendering.”<sup>21</sup>

The same phenomenon could be easily noticed in terms of putting an end to the war. After defeating the LTTE, President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared: “We are aware that some countries being battered by terrorism have taken strength from the victories won by Sri Lanka over terrorism. It is time for the countries facing attacks from terrorism to look back and see where they had gone wrong, whereas Sri Lanka has succeeded.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore state actors promoted the end of the war as the defeat of terrorism. They were oriented towards putting an end to the arm conflict as soon as possible and “there was a clear aim...to destroy the LTTE no matter what the cost.”<sup>23</sup> Even though the LTTE was indeed proscribed as a terrorist organization and, from many points of view, it acted against the Tamil people which they claimed to represent, for the Tamil community the struggle for a separate state was about making justice. Therefore this attitude of proclaiming the military victory of the government over the insurgents as a defeat of terrorism leaves automatically the ethnic issues, which led to such a violent confrontation in the first place, unaddressed. Under these circumstances, there is no guarantee that their conflictive potential won’t lead to further disputes in the future.

Given the polarized ethnic perspectives on the war and the institutional refusal to explore ethnic tensions as root causes of the conflict in order to make sure they won’t cause future struggles, how can ethnic reconciliation and sustainable peace be achieved? And where should the process start from?

Peace researcher Camilla Orjuela focused on the role of civil society in the peace building process in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the fact that ethnic reconciliation cannot be achieved exclusively at the top level and it is important that civic peace work is done rather “mass-based and bottom-up.”<sup>24</sup> So according to her, it is very important that the “people” are involved in creating an interethnic dialogue. From

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1152.

<sup>21</sup> Orjuela, Camilla, “Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?” in *Journal of Peace Research*, Sage Publications, vol. 40, no. 2, 2003, p. 200.

<sup>22</sup> Sri Lanka has lesson to world on defeating terror – President Rajapaksa, retrieved on 05.04.2013 from <http://www.president.gov.lk/news.php?newsID=1049>.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, A. N., Sri Lankan Defense Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa in an interview to BBC, retrieved on 06.04.2013 from <http://www.ndu.edu/press/understanding-sri-lanka.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Orjuela, Camilla, *op. cit.*, p. 195.



this perspective, civil society work can significantly contribute to creating peace and reconciliation by “addressing ethnic divides and public opinion with education and awareness-raising programmes, as well as cross-ethnic dialogue, addressing politics with popular mobilization, advocacy work, and informal diplomacy, and addressing economic issues through reconstruction and development.”<sup>25</sup>

A key factor in reconciliation seems to be meeting the “other”. The conflict has torn apart the Sinhalese and the Tamils. There has been a breakdown of trust and the two communities know little about the “others”. They go to different schools, speak different languages and have different religions. The ethnic cleansing during the war had a major impact as well, taking the psychological gap in between ethnic groups at a physical level and making it even wider. Camilla Orjuela says that these problems can be addressed by peace organizations “through education” and “by letting people meet the ethnic other”.<sup>26</sup> As shown in a previous chapter – “The End of the War. Community Recovery and Social Reconstruction”, there are already numerous initiatives of this kind in the island, some of them indeed successful.

I also believe that the concept of “otherness” as opposed to the “self” is a huge obstacle which has to be overcome if the two identities of “Sinhalese” and “Tamil” are to be reunited under a common identity – “Sri Lankan”. It is very challenging when “the other” has been seen as “the enemy” for so long and when there are so many prejudices and stereotypes people still believe in, but not impossible. Tolerance, education, awareness, willingness to understand another point of view and most of all efforts to bring the ethnic groups under a unified Sri Lanka where the identity of “Sri Lankan” prevails and those of “Sinhalese” and “Tamils” are secondary are just as many answers to the matter of reconciliation.

Undoubtedly the issue of ethnic reconciliation is very complex. Building trust in a society shattered by a long and violent civil war is not easy, and requires both institutional and civic mobilization. It is however possible and it will be achieved in Sri Lanka as well if sustained efforts are made in the direction of the long path towards durable peace.

### *Conclusions*

The perception of the Sinhalese people has been highly influenced by Buddhist religion and myth-history. Monks and political leaders used interpretations in order to encourage the Sinhalese to see the Tamils as “intruders” and to consider them the “original” people of the island whose responsibility is to preserve Sri Lanka as the homeland of Sinhalese Buddhists. Much as the Sinhalese, Tamils wanted to protect their culture, which they considered to be threatened by the main ethnic group. Feeling marginalized and discriminated by post-colonial political measures taken by an almost entirely Sinhalese government, Tamils feared more

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 202.

and more that the “oppressive” Sinhalese were determined to destroy their cultural legacy. With fear, another strong sentiment arose: responsibility to protect Tamil culture from extinction at all costs. Both Sinhalese and Tamil attitudes were reactive phenomena. At the same time, in the eyes of both communities, the war was a legitimate one. This aspect made the conflict a very difficult one to handle. Ethnic reconciliation is still a developing process in Sri Lanka and can be achieved if sustained efforts are made to understand the “other”.

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