Research on Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: A Critique Within

Jayadeva Uyangoda*

The argument of this paper concerns the political and intellectual utility of a concept which is often used to define the politics of our age, ‘ethnicity.’ The paper’s argument has an unfortunate history. I was invited in late 1998 to write a paper on the state of research on ethnicity in Sri Lanka. While researching for the paper, I was struck by the total absence of a democratic political thrust in contemporary ethnic politics in Sri Lanka. Even the vast social science scholarship on Sri Lanka’s ethnic politics is devoid of a critique of ethnicity that can germinate strategies for political emancipation for the marginalized and dispossessed communities. Meanwhile, the existing critique of ethnic politics has emerged merely as forms of denunciatory ethnic politics, rationalizing one variety of ethnic politics as opposed to another. On reflection, it occurred to me that neither ethnic politics nor scholarship on ethnicity has really made a contribution towards the Sri Lankan people’s quest for democracy, justice, equality and a decent post-colonial social order.

In this paper, I intend to examine the political conditions of social science research on ethnicity in a society characterized by a protracted ethnic
conflict. It is written as a reflection on the following question: is the social science category of ‘ethnicity’ any longer useful in the production of emancipatory knowledge? Answering this question is somewhat difficult, not because it contains great intellectual puzzles, but because it is not easy to abandon the shadow of ethnicity which has been hovering over our imagination so closely and so oppressively. Yet, I want to make an attempt at cleansing our own ethnic minds. This to me is an opportunity to have a critical dialogue with the experience of ethnic politics in contemporary Sri Lanka. This is also a self-exculpatory exercise in the sense that I have been a participant in Sri Lanka’s ethnic politics as well as ethnic research. I have stood for minority ethnic rights; I have defended the right of ethnic minorities for self-determination. I have argued for and worked towards federalist re-structuring of Sri Lanka’s post-colonial State. I have also campaigned for ethnic harmony, ethnic reconciliation and ethnic peace in Sri Lanka. With years of political experience in relation to the ethnic question in Sri Lanka behind, I now begin to have doubts about the way in which the very category of ethnicity had provoked our political imagination. In Sri Lanka’s ethnic politics, practices associated with ethnicity do not seem to provoke any new vision for peace, democracy, pluralism and reconciliation. On the contrary, all forms of ethnic politics violently and actively negate the possibilities for conflict resolution, peace and democratization. Indeed, politics of mono-ethnicity has captured the center of Sri Lanka’s political debate to such an extent that democratic re-organization of society may not be possible unless the political struggle for justice, equality, fairness etc., is disengaged from the politics of ethnicity

Tyranny of Ethnicity

However, it is not easy to disengage with ethnicity. Its tyrannical presence in everyday life has colored our visions of the world to such an extent that we are constantly compelled to think of ourselves as members of specific and distinct ethnic groups. Our political value as individuals or members of communities is
Identity, Culture and Politics

defined and measured by our blood relationship with an ethnic group. There was an assumption shared in social science scholarship that theories of race and racial superiority had lost their capacity to seize control of the public space. But in ethnicised public space, political primitivism of ethno-racist mobilization has encroached into the democratic domain too. As Sri Lanka’s contemporary experience clearly demonstrates, the democratization of the public space provides unprecedented opportunities for counter-democratic ethnic politics to capture the public imagination. With the proliferation of the non-state media, both print and electronic, ethnic ideologues of the most sectarian kind are seen occupying the center stage of the public debate and deliberation. While advocating values of inter-community intolerance, suspicion and hatred, these ethno-ideologues have also emerged as a new stratum of political knowledge producers. The knowledge they produce and disseminate is so profoundly ethnic in its narrowest sense that the pluralistic reconstitution of the political world seems to have slipped away from the realm of the possible.

Meanwhile, de-ethnicized forms of self-understanding are most difficult to come by except in feminist conversational modes. Class-based political conversations are almost non-existent. In the public sphere, we hardly identify ourselves in class terms. We feel shy to publicly acknowledge our class identity labels – bourgeois, working class or peasant. What it means is that we do not have a discourse of social emancipation, although political imagination in a class specific idiom has historically associated itself with the politics of social emancipation. But ethnicity is different from the class, and even the nation, as a category of political imagination. It does not promise social emancipation. It doesn’t call for a critical understanding of how, within a given ethnic formation, inequalities and injustices occur and are reproduced. For its own community, ethnic narratives fulfill nothing, except sending its young men and women to voluntary or pension-induced death. In its blindness to social emancipation, post-colonial ethnic politics differentiates itself from anti-colonial nationalist politics.
End of the Road for Ethnic Research

In the expansive body of social science literature on ethnicity, identity and ethnic violence, Sri Lanka figures quite prominently. Sri Lankan social scientists have also produced a wide body of literature on these themes, representing a variety of perspectives. A classification of this body of literature could be made under several headings, representing a wide spectrum of approaches to ethnicity, politics and the state: majoritarian, minoritarian, unitarist, centralist, devolutionist, federalist, pluralistic and even fascistic. Research on ethnicity has also been institutionalized. It has entered the teaching programs in the universities. There are academic journals devoted to the understanding of ethnicity. Approaches to ethnicity have divided the intellectual communities.

In an age where class, socialism and revolution are no longer the markers of the political commitment of intellectuals, notions of equality, rights and justice that have been central to projects of social emancipation are now seen in zero-sum ethnic calculations. That elementary questions of politics, who gets what, is almost totally understood in terms of what one’s own ethnic group gets through public policy as opposed to other ethnic groups. Gunasinghe noted as far back as 1984 that in both Sinhalese and Tamil social formations in Sri Lanka, ‘class contradictions are over-determined by the ethnic conflict’.1

A pervasive sense of defeatism appears to prevail particularly among those who saw, about two decades ago, an emancipatory potential in Sri Lanka’s minority ethnic politics. At a time when the Sinhalese ruling class consistently refused to reform the post-colonial State in a pluralist-democratic framework, its was the Tamil minority demand for federalism and a separate State that brought the need for radical political reforms to the center of political competition and conflict. However, nearly twenty years of a protracted and destructive ethnic war, the democratic suggestions of the ethnic conflict are no longer visible. What appears now in Sri Lanka is that the present ethnic war has produced a logic of its own re-production, autonomous of the democratic struggle that is taking place in civil society. As Rajasingham argues, a Sri
Lankan variety of ‘dirty-war’ has been created with its own hidden economies and subterranean power structures that may not be dismantled through mere constitutional reforms for peace.² What it means is that the protracted civil war that has had its origins in ethnic reasons has now entered a non-ethnic phase in which the war’s link with ethnic grievances have been weakened. Meanwhile, the separatist military project of Tamil minority nationalism has secured greater autonomy from the political process for constitutional reform. Sri Lanka’s experience also demonstrates that the extreme majoritarian politics and extreme minoritarian politics are mutually exclusive only in a limited domain of contestation. The discursive enmities between the two are enacted when the need to control civilian populations is at the center of their politico-military agenda. In the broad structures of existence, the two are mutually collaborative and inter-dependent because one produces the conditions for the other’s reproduction. One simply cannot exist without the other. Both are oppressive, sectarian and narcissistic political projects.

**Crisis of Purpose in the Politics of Ethnicity**

Ethnicity-centered politics has been a major facet of the twentieth century political change of Sri Lanka. Researchers on Sri Lanka’s ethnicity have documented and extensively commented on this process.³ However, long before social scientists invented the term ‘ethnicity’ – this invention occurred in the late 1970s – and saw State and inter-community violence as a domain of sustained intellectual inquiry, two communities had been active in defining the shape as well as the path of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. The first were ideologues of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities and professional politicians who thought of themselves as true representatives of ‘their’ own ‘people.’ Beginning in the early twentieth century, they envisioned, or at least worked towards, a post-colonial Sri Lanka in which, as social scientists later came to recognize, ethnic identities were firmly entrenched. This provided a particular mode of collective political understanding to social groups in which
their political value could be reckoned in terms of their numbers, their numerical size and the majority-minority dichotomy. The second community was the socialist movement. The socialists counter-posited social class with ethnicity, often warning of the divisive and reactionary consequences of ethnicity-centric political mobilization. In a brilliant polemic written in 1963, a Marxist who happened to be a Tamil argued that minoritarian ‘political monolithism’ must sooner or later beget majoritarian ‘political monolithism.’

However, the socialists lost the battle for the shaping of the character of Sri Lanka’s post-colonial state in a pluralistic framework, securing for the ethnic minorities equality of status with the majority. Two reasons can be seen as crucial to this failure of the Left. The first is the compromise made by the Left parties in the sixties and seventies with the Sinhalese nationalist mainstream. Caught up in the logic of parliamentary-electoral politics of reformism, the mainstream Left entered into coalition politics with nationalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party. In that process, they not only abandoned the politics of ethnic pluralism, but also championed the majoritarian unitarism as the organizational doctrine of Sri Lanka’s post-colonial state. The second reason is linked to the Sri Lankan socialist fetishism of the unitary state. With a firm belief in the unity of the working masses that should politically be expressed in the unity of the state’s political structures (unitary state), the Left could not offer the minorities any radical alternative to ethnic separatism. Ultimately, as it happened so forcefully in the 1980s, ethno-nationalists of both Sinhalese and Tamil social formations wrested total control of the political debate concerning Sri Lanka’s state and its organizational forms.

This backdrop enabled competing Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic projects to emerge as the most dynamic forces of political change of modern Sri Lanka. Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic mobilization initially represented an organizational form of political bargaining that could have been necessary for a decolonizing post-colonial polity beginning to lay the foundations for democratic competition. In the immediate post-independence years, there were also
competing social desires – or class projects – to appropriate the domains of state policy so that postcolonial state resources could be marshaled for the service of different social strata. The 1950s were crucial in the mobilization of these social desires for the appropriation of state power, because during this decade the political elite brought the masses to the arena of ethnic mobilization. It is during this decade that Sinhalese and Tamil political elite gave the masses of people of their social formations first lessons in ethnicized political imagination. In this ethnic reckoning of the world, freedom, justice, equality, rights and welfare were to be imagined and bargained for not as universal public goods available to all citizens, but primarily as ethnic entitlements. The development of post-colonial Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms in the 1950s meant in effect the ethnicization of the public sphere.

The formation of ethnic violence was the second defining feature of this decade. I have argued elsewhere that the ethnic violence of 1958 was a key biographical event in Sri Lanka’s post-colonial state formation. In the acts of state-sponsored anti-minority violence, the ethnic majoritarianism came to be firmly inscribed in the defining narrative of Sri Lanka’s political modernity and modern state. In other words, Sri Lanka’s post-colonial state came of age in 1958. It concretized in its practices the Sinhala majoritarian desires for the appropriation of state power. The anti-Tamil riots of 1958, in which Sinhalese nationalist forces as well as the state was directly implicated, was also the moment for these two social formations to discover themselves in new, adversarial terms. Ethnic riots indeed serve some deep structural logic of the modern nation-state. During and after riots, ethnic communities tend to re-discover themselves through acts, memories and narratives of enmity, violence and hatred. It is this sense that the 1958 riots enabled Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese and Tamil communities to discover themselves anew, in narratives of evil other.

However, ethnic relations as a field of inquiry entered the agenda of Sri Lankan social science writings much later, after 1983. What is remarkable about the social science scholarship on Sri Lanka’s ethnicity is the fact that, with only
a few exceptions, Sri Lankan scholarship in general did not consider it necessary to explore into the trajectory of ethnic relations. Among these exceptions are Weerawardena, Arasaratnam and Karalasingham. Weerawardena courageously pointed out in as far back as 1953 that the Sinhalese political leadership violated, within just one year of independence, the solemn political undertaking that they had given to the Tamil leadership to the effect that the minorities would not be treated differently. Arasaratnam warned both Sinhalese and Tamil political elites of the negative implications for nation-building of the politics of ethnic mistrust. Meanwhile, Karalasingham, a Marxist, was acutely critical of isolationist politics of the Tamil bourgeoisie as well as the majoritarian hegemonism of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie. Still more remarkable is the fact that those scholars who paid extended attention to Sri Lanka’s ethnic relations and forewarned the inevitability of the crisis of a majoritarian ethnic state were Europeans and Americans. Even the titles of their texts were direct pointers to the crisis formation in the majoritarian nation-building exercise in the little ex-colony which they knew quite well. Wriggins’ 1960 text was called *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation* (Princeton University Press) while Farmer gave a more dramatic name to his slim volume, *Ceylon, A Divided Nation*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1963. The long title which Kearney gave to his 1967 work was more descriptive, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon* (Duke University Press). During this period, Sri Lankan political scientists and modern historians were commenting on nationalism in general and formation of elites and their political institutions in particular while anthropologists and sociologists were busy in understanding land tenure, caste and kinship in the Sinhalese countryside.

The violence of 1983 created conditions for an age of research on ethnicity in Sri Lanka by Sri Lankan scholars. The state-sponsored anti-Tamil violence of July-August 1983 was to mark a decisive rupture in Sinhalese-Tamil relations as well as in the manner in which the Tamil community related themselves to the Sri Lankan state. In this period, the focus of social science
research in Sri Lanka shifted from its traditional concerns – social structures, family and kinship, class formation, the agrarian question and political economy. In the research on ethnicity, three main areas – history of identity formation, forms of ethno-cultural consciousness and the failure of political institutions—occupied most of the intellectual attention. Attempts made by social scientists to explain ethnic violence – violence was also seen as a sudden eruption of some destructive energy hidden in the Sri Lankan -- produced a series of engaged texts by some leading practitioners of anthropology. 

As one may quickly notice in a survey of Sri Lanka’s social science literature on ethnic violence, one notable sphere of intellectual disinterest has been the immediate human experiences in events of ethnic violence. Even though 1983 inaugurated the age of ethnic research in Sri Lanka, the events of violence that occurred in July and August that year have not yet been documented. We may also note that there is no documentation on the event of 1958 ethnic riots, except just one text written during the events. Despite the sophistication of intellectual inquiry that defines the research on Sri Lanka’s ethnic violence, the social science knowledge of 1958 and 1983 still remain poor and scanty. It is almost like that there is a Sri Lankan social science consensus not to address the question of human misery and tragedy under conditions of extreme ethnic violence.

Meanwhile, Sinhalese and Tamil societies appear to grapple with the past of ethnic violence in two contrasting paradigms. In the Sinhalese society, the anti-Tamil violence of 1958 is almost totally forgotten. The anti-Tamil violence of 1983 is in the process of forgetting. For Sinhalese society, this forgetting may be a political strategy of self-affirmation. The self-understanding of Sinhalese society, propagated by the ethno-religious intelligentsia for about a century, has been that compassion and loving-kindness govern the society’s personal and the public spheres. The Sinhalese society’s claim to legitimacy as a modern nation has been so exclusively built on this self-mythology of a peace-loving, gentle and feminine community that admission to the practices of mass
violence, either by its political cadres or its state, is an act of self-negation. Therefore, it is also necessary for the Sinhalese nationalists to remember the atrocities perpetrated on the Sinhalese by Tamils in 1958 and after 1983. Meanwhile, the political memories in Tamil society are replete with written and oral narratives of the violence of 1958 and 1983. For Sri Lankan Tamils, 1958 and 1983 were defining events of their exclusion from the realm of state in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The majoritarian forgetting of 1958 and 1983 and the minoritarian re-living of 1958 and 1983 are two competing representations of Sri Lanka’s post-colonial history of ethnic relations. Should 1958 and 1983 be forgotten or remembered? The intellectual communities of Sri Lanka have not yet grappled with this problem, although an answer to it may provide a key to ethnic reconciliation and peace.

There is perhaps another way to pose this problem. Would a Sinhalese political leader ever apologize, on behalf of the Sri Lankan state, to the Tamil community for the atrocities of 1958 and 1983? Should an official apology by a leader of the Sri Lankan government, in turn, generate possibilities for Sinhala-Tamil reconciliation? The answer to second question is obviously ‘yes.’ But the answer to the first question is somewhat difficult. If we go by the experience in the recent past, the moral argument for ethnic reconciliation in Sri Lanka has not been a strong one. For a majoritarian state to apologize for anti-minority violence in the past, a regime with tremendous moral courage is essential. It is only with such moral authority that the Sinhalese ruling class can ever succeed in taking the sting out of ethnic politics and restore Sri Lanka’s ethnic relations as an exercise of democratic reconstitution. It is the misfortune of Sri Lanka’s democracy that the People’s Alliance regime that came to power in 1994 on a plank of peace, democracy and ethnic reconciliation did not think it morally compelling to appoint a commission of inquiry into anti-Tamil riots of July 1983. The point is that Sri Lanka does not seem to have the capacity to summon collective political memories of communities for the larger good of all. Instead, both Sinhala and Tamil societies have spawned a modern tradition of using and
abusing such memories for the hardening of already existing animosities and sustaining the evil other. Historical memories are then the privileged domain of ethnic propagandists while the social science researchers have by and large shunned it.

**Ethnicity and Democracy**

The question, then, is why can’t we, social scientists, now abandon the category of ethnicity? It appears to me that it is not easy for us to abandon ethnicity, as long as we ground our thinking on the invincibility of the present historical form of the nation-state. Ethnicity as a category for both analysis and action has no meaning outside the modern nation-state and its ardent believers. The nation state, in its classical European form, based itself on national identity. In non-European societies, national identity was thought to be the amalgamation of multiple ethnic identities. Through its majoritarian ethnic practices, the post-colonial nation state has hardened minoritarian grievances and demands. Then came the community of social scientists to explain the contradictions of the modern nation-state in non-European societies in a theoretical narrative of ethnicity. Explanation easily led to naturalization of ethnicity. In this naturalizing narrative of the nation-state, the recognition of separate ethnic identities was construed to provide the basis for political pluralism. It is quite astounding for us to realize that the today’s social scientists generally imagine the modern state not in class terms, but through the categories of tightly constructed ethnic identities. Even the ideal form of the modern state which democratic social science scholarship has imagined is described in ethnic terms, as a multi-ethnic pluralism. This is how the social sciences have capitulated before ethnic politics. The logic involved here is very simple; multi-ethnicity cannot define itself outside separate ethnicity. It is separation that gives meaning to multi-ness. But beyond multi-ethnicity, we don’t have a framework for political emancipation.
Research on the ethnic question in Sri Lanka provides us with a paradigmatic example of what I just mentioned. In the most democratic, pluralistic and radical writings on the ethnic question in Sri Lanka, there are three ethnic identities – Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim – and four religious identities – Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Islamic – which are constantly referred to as historically evolved identity forms. The social science imagination stops at these seven identities. All Sri Lankan people are then assumed to include themselves within any combination of these categories of identity. It further infers that all citizens of Sri Lanka see themselves through these categories of identity and act accordingly. My argument is that this is a most dangerous and fallacious assumption. Only ethnic ideologues, census enumerators and social scientists appear to believe in this assumption. They collectively produce and reproduce these categories through their propaganda, surveys, teaching and research. They arbitrarily impose identity categories on human communities, with little or no sensitivity to the fact that people don’t live their everyday life on ethnic identity.

My eyes were opened to this side of the social science fallacy of ethnicity when a year ago I was teaching a course on `Identity and Politics’ to a class of over two hundred first year undergraduate students. While discussing the question of ethnic identity, I asked my students to identify themselves in terms of ‘ethno-religious identities’. When I asked ‘Sinhalese-Buddhists’ to raise their hands, only a reluctant few responded in a class of over two hundred students. Given the ethno-religious demography of undergraduates at Colombo university, and in the context of heightened ethnic politics in society, a social scientist would have thought that at least 95 per cent of them could have identified themselves as Sinhalese-Buddhists. When I spoke to some of the students as to why they did not see themselves as Sinhalese-Buddhists, they told me that they were not exactly sure about their identity in the same terms that we discussed the issue in the classroom. Some insisted that they did not look at themselves through ethnic identity categories. One student responded
by saying; “when someone asks me whether I am a Sinhalese, of course, I have
to say ‘yes.’ Otherwise, I don’t think about it.” Ever since I have been bothered
by the following question: haven’t we, social scientists, naturalized ethnic
identities and arbitrarily imposed them on human beings who live with
multiple identities?

Then the task before us is one concerned with an exciting task: de-
naturalization of ethnic identities. One of the disquieting legacies of politics of
and research on ethnicity is that both enterprises have created conditions for
naturalizing ethnic identities. Let me illustrate this point. Is there any
possibility whatsoever in Sri Lanka’s public sphere today to identify human
communities that inhabit the island in any other identitarian category than
ethnic? From the point of view of the visiting foreign journalist, university
academic, professional politician, the political ideologue and the census official,
one has to be a Sinhalese, a Tamil, or a Muslim. Or else, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a
Christian, or a Muslim. We have allowed the public realm to be totally
regimentalized for ethnic identification of communities. It is perhaps not too
ungenerous a tribute to researchers on ethnicity to say that they have been to a
great extent responsible for this crisis in the public sphere.

To look at how the naturalization of ethnic identity categories has
enforced on us a sort of one-way path to ethnic political imagination, we may
turn to Sri Lanka’s present debate on ethnic conflict resolution. The government
of Sri Lanka designed in 1995 a constitutional reform package, as a means to
resolving the ethnic conflict, proposing devolution of power on the basis of
regional ethnic identity. This reform measure won acclaim of all communities
of democracy, peace, constitutional pluralism and peace. Although it remained
unimplemented due to the unfavorable balance of power in the legislature, the
new constitutional proposal unleashed a new and vicious wave of ethnic
politics. It has given a new impetus to majoritarian ethnic fears, anxieties and
insecurities among the Sinhalese nationalists. Their argument is that once state
power is devolved to Tamil regions on the basis of ethnicity, it would
constitutionally legitimize the Tamil ethnic claim to a separate state. There are also minoritarian ethnic fears about a power-sharing settlement. The Muslim minority’s fear is that the devolution of state power would place them under the permanent hegemony of the Tamil ‘majority.’ By proposing power sharing on the principle of ethnically defined regions, the government has almost unwittingly let the political space wide open for further hardening the logic of ethnic identities among Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities. No state can conceivably resolve ethnic minority grievances concerning political power while the ethnic majority is not convinced of the preservation of its own grip of state power. Not at least in a parliamentary democracy which has grown up into a rigid regime of majoritarian democracy. The dilemma, as demonstrated in this example, is that ethnic problems are unlikely to be resolved by ethnic means, even though the solution is couched in the language of liberal constitutionalism.

This point can be further elaborated by referring to the predicament of the Tamil minoritarian nationalist politics. Sri Lankan Tamil community has a history of about ninety years of articulating its demands, grievances and aspirations in the idiom of a separate ethnic identity. The Tamil community identity has also been a powerful plank of group mobilization. It has provided an evocative idiom for the Tamil political leadership to highlight the grievances and injustices suffered by their community. Meanwhile, the political goal Tamil national aspirations moved progressively from power sharing at the center to power sharing in the periphery and then to separate sovereignty. The idea of separate sovereignty brought the Sri Lankan Tamil community into direct military confrontation with the state. The consequences of this process have been unimaginably disastrous for the entire Sri Lankan Tamil community. The geographical region, which the Tamil nationalists claim as the traditional homeland of Sri Lankan Tamils, is now reduced to one of the most primitive human habitations in the world. The war reduced the once prosperous urban centers of the ‘Tamil homeland’ to archeological sites in just ten years. Yet, an
Identity, Culture and Politics

ethnic identity-based political project, which has been transformed into a military project, is reigning supreme in the politics of Tamil society. In this most uncompromising manifestation of ethnic politics, a strange logic of political reasoning appears to work. The greater the misery and destruction of the Tamil society, the grandeur is the project of ‘national liberation.’ It is difficult now for the Sri Lankan Tamil society to extricate itself from the militaristic agenda of the extreme minoritarian nationalism which has given rise to a form of military-fascism in Tamil politics. As much as the Sinhalese society is a captive of the politics of ethnic identity, so is the Sri Lankan Tamil society. The moral of this story is also simple in its starkness: ethnic politics can only highlight ethnic grievances; it cannot bring about ethnic emancipation.

This is where the Sri Lankan experience of minority ethnic politics compels us to re-think the link which we assumed to exist between ethnicity and democracy. It seems that minoritarian politics of ethnicity has gone through a specific trajectory, from a democratic critique of the state to a fascistic alternative to the majoritarian state. In the immediate post-colonial years, Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism imagined Sri Lanka’s future in federalist terms. Their federalist proposals constituted the only democratizing effort to have emerged in Sri Lanka’s post-colonial political debate. All the other political visions – Sinhalese majoritarian, Left -socialist and radical –Left – were unitarist projects in which the state power was to remain centralized. In these visions of the future Sri Lankan state, minority rights were to be guaranteed not by means of democratizing the structures of the existing state, but by the majority’s gestures of magnanimity and grace. In this context, the greatest political contribution made by Tamil ethnic politics to Sri Lanka’s politics is its project of democratizing the state by broad-basing the ethnic foundations of the state. That broad-basing had to be codified in a federal constitution. Tamil nationalism was equipped to make that contribution not because its politics was ethnic, but because the Tamils community was at the margins of state
power. It is the communities in the margins of state that has the capacity to imagine its political emancipation through further democratization of the state.

But the democratic project is no longer the center of political attraction in Sri Lanka’s Tamil ethnic politics. A military movement that has subjected the political aspirations of Tamil community to military gains of the movement has monopolized today’s Tamil nationalist politics. In this logic of militarized politics of Tamil nationalism, spectacular military gains and sacrifices appear to take precedence over political compromise. It has placed the idea of a separate ethnic state at the center of Tamil political imagination. Its unwavering commitment to achieving the goal of a separate state through military means and the Sri Lankan state’s relentless capacity to withstand the Tamil nationalist insurgency have given rise to a protracted and total war in the Tamil society and its geographical spaces. Caught up in a logic of a protracted war of ‘national liberation’, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has transformed itself into an organization of military-totalitarianism. A defining feature of the military-totalitarian politics of the LTTE is the total denial of political space for alternatives to function in the Tamil polity. Being an awesome military machine, it has single handedly decimated democratic political formations in Sri Lankan Tamil society, a task which the Sinhalese majoritarian state could never have carried out to full fruition. The irony of the Sinhalese-Tamil politics in Sri Lanka today is that when the Sinhalese ruling class offers democratic constitutional options to the Tamil society, extreme Tamil nationalism totally rejects any option of democracy. It even kills and silences those Tamils who are likely to imagine democratic options for the Tamil polity. The experience of Sri Lanka Tamil ethnic politics is that ethnic politics can highlight felt grievances of an identity community, but it cannot offer democratic solutions. In other words, ethnic problems don’t have ethnic solutions. They have only democratic solutions.
**Ethnicity and its Future**

The arguments developed in this paper may be elaborated as follows. Firstly, research on ethnicity, even among intellectuals committed to the social-democratic - liberal political ideals of pluralism and democracy, appears to have reached the last stages of its utility even for a minimum democratization project. The progressive literature on ethnicity in Sri Lanka has produced a rich body of knowledge on the causes of the ethnic conflict, its origins and spread. Enough proposals for the resolution of the conflict, within the dimensions of the existing state, have also been produced in a joint effort made by intellectual, human rights and political communities. In this sphere, if any new knowledge is to come, it is bound to be limited mainly to further refining of the nuances of arguments and analysis that have already been made.

Secondly, rarely has research on ethnicity in Sri Lanka interrogated the very category of ethnicity, subjecting it to examination with regard to its political utility as a basis of political association among a diversity of communities. Even in the most critical body of literature on ethnicity, the categories of ethnic identity -- Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and so on -- are taken as given, as legitimate bases of the organization of political power in the form of the state. Only very recently have Sri Lankan social scientists begun to examine the fluidity and the tenuous nature of ethnic identities, outside a conceptual framework in which ethnic identities were treated as categories frozen in contemporary history.

Thirdly, research on ethnicity has, perhaps unwittingly, reinforced, naturalized and hardened ethnic identities among communities. Historians have debated the periodizing of the formation of ethnic identities, anthropologists have unraveled how identities make everyday life meaningful to micro communities. Political scientists and jurists have critiqued the state and the political elite for not accommodating plural ethnic identities in the organization of state power. Meanwhile, ideologues and political leaders of
ethno-nationalisms have popularized ethnic identity politics in competing discourses of mono-ethnicity. The critical social scientists on ethnicity and ethnic ideologues in Sinhala and Tamil societies, in their competing projects, have now come to meet each other in a totally unexpected manner. Their preoccupation with ethnic identity politics has created an iron cage of political imagination.

Finally, if we are seriously interested in human emancipation, we need to re-imagine identities. We must then be able to critically disengage ourselves with a category that has robbed communities of their own space for democratic reflection, democratic contemplation and democratic action. Victims of ethnic politics, both majoritarian and minoritarian, can provide new and more contemporary categories of identity that can really re-kindle our political imagination for human emancipation.

* The author is associated with the Department of History and Political Science, University of Colombo.
Endnotes


9. This refers to Vittachchi, Tarzi, 1958, Emergency ‘58. The government banned this book immediately after its publication.