

Responding to Aluthgama

by Qadri Ismail - on 07/10/2014

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Responding to Aluthgama

Imagine a country, an island in the Indian Ocean. Let's call it Serendib (ooh, the irony). Imagine further: several groups, including those named Limat, Milsum and Alahnis, populate the island. A long war ended there some five or so years ago. Nevertheless, peace gives it a pass. Just the other day, a Limat woman, raped repeatedly by the Serendibian military over a period of years, managed to escape the country and tell her story abroad. It made international headlines – well, not in China, Russia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, but in Europe and North America. A few days later, her mother, still in Serendib, was murdered by the military. Brazenly. In full view of the rest of the village.

Since the force of imagination grants us license to conjure up just about anything, let's also imagine that the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, in the Hague, has indicted the leaders of Serendib, a band of brutal brothers, of committing war crimes. Responding to accusations that the ICC has hitherto only targeted Africans, the Prosecutor thought Asians

would make a nice change. (I should add here that even my imagination prohibits me from conceiving a scenario in which Europeans and North Americans – mass murderers like George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Tony Blair and Barack Obama – ever face such indictment.)

So, hearing the Limat woman's story, the Prosecutor asked her to testify against the brothers. Initially, she had planned to. Now, she refused.

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But, you may wonder: why introduce an essay responding to the organized onslaught by agents of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, many of them muscled young men, on Muslims in Aluthgama and its environs by invoking an imaginary story? Because, whether I believe it to be the case or not, I cannot say, not in public, that, during and after the war, the Sri Lankan (though one could follow Galaboda Aththe Gnanasara's lead and call it Sinhala) military has systematically raped Tamil women – and, yes, even men – mostly in the north. Not occasionally or in a sudden fit of insanity. Systematically.

Because one way of summarizing the history of postcolonial Sri Lanka is to argue that we have failed to hear the call of the other. Most destructively, of course, in the case of those terrible twins, Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. The former oppressed others to establish its dominance over the country. The latter, in the case of the LTTE, oppressed others in the cause of resisting oppression. To this day, those who demand Tamil self-determination negate the presence of Muslims, and Sinhalese, in the northeast. For their part, the TNA and TGTE consistently vacillate between claiming to represent the Tamil nation and, when convenient, the “Tamil-speaking people.”

In the wake of Aluthgama, and the anti-Muslim campaign waged for the past two-three years by those bloody bullshitters (BBS), we Muslims cannot, should not, follow the example of Tamil and Sinhala nationalism, narcissisms that only care about the self. Rather, we should lend other Sri Lankans our ears. We are not alone – and need not think of ourselves as such. Put differently, we must not understand our subjectivity as exclusively Muslim.

Yes I know we feel alone, are hurt, hurting, despairing, demoralized, scared; mostly, I think, scared. (Though I hope at least some of us are angry, too.) We do not know when, or where, to expect the next attack. Though we fear it must happen. But we can avoid letting our pathetic

leadership script our response to this one. Narcissism, the demonstration of concern only for ourselves, our own agony, seems the predictable, default option. We could, though, embrace another.

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Before getting there, a few words, culled from various reports, on the attacks themselves – not a riot, “wild or uncontrolled behavior,” as the dictionary defines it. Rather, to quote Latheef Farook, they were “meticulously planned and executed to military precision.” (While I staunchly oppose the Israeli state, especially now with Gaza pounded from the air, I urge Farook to stop seeing a hidden Israeli hand behind every strike on Sri Lankan Muslims, something he himself calls speculation. If he has evidence, he should present it. Otherwise, desist.) Thus making the question of origin, literally who threw the first stone, irrelevant, as Malinda Seneviratne has also argued. Some part of the “mob” was not a mob but an organized group of quasi-military trained young men with a plan, brought from outside the locality.

Most of the destruction of Muslim property – and Sinhala property was destroyed, too – took place during a curfew, with the police and STF, at best, enjoying the view. Landlines were cut. Calls to police emergency numbers, ignored. Local doctors refused to treat the injured, many shot, with military precision, not above the waist as in Weliveriya, but below the knee. Guns killed the three Muslim dead – M. J. M. Imran, M. R. M. Jairash (also known as Zahiran) and M. N. M. Shiraz – though the Judicial Medical Officer manufactured knife cuts where eye-witnesses saw bullet wounds. The fourth man slain, Karuppan Sivalingam, an UpCountry Tamil, was the only one hacked.

Bluntly put, the state is undeniably involved. One cannot otherwise account for a series of its agencies suddenly, coincidentally, switching off and the police/STF enabling the attacks when nobody was supposed to roam the streets.

The same Sinhala nationalist state, let us never forget, that persecuted the Tamils, including the UpCountry, virtually from the moment of our independence. Servilely begging it for succor, the response of several Muslim organizations, only demonstrates their own, narrow self-interest.

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Take, for instance, the many statements of the National Shoora Council, instituted earlier this year, according to Farook as an “inclusive” body – one wonders how many women it includes – given the failure of our political leadership to adequately protect/represent us. On June 16th, the NSC actually conveyed its “appreciation for the Police and Special Task Force (STF) for their strong presence, which minimized losses, suffering and humiliation though most attacks took place in areas where the forces were not present while some attacks took place notwithstanding their presence.” This directly contradicts the testimony of the survivors and observations of journalists on the spot, like Dharisha Bastians. Indeed, it represses the anger and dismay of the area’s Muslims in order to produce an account favorable to the state.

The NSC also calls the BBS “an anti-national foreign [Israeli, no doubt] funded project aimed at destroying internationally the image of Sri Lanka as a nation of tolerant people,” a formulation so ludicrous one doesn’t know where to begin rebutting it. So, while stifling a laugh, let me just say: while I am not quite sure if the U.S.-driven UNHRC should be investigating Sri Lanka – the U.S., the world’s worst human rights offender of this century, should be its first target – such an investigation could not take place if we had, in fact, an “international” reputation for tolerance. Quite the converse, our reputation is plastered with mud, stained in blood.

(By the way, it bears mention that a Jordanian prince and former ambassador to the U.S. replaces Navi Pillai as the next head of the UNHRC. The doctrine of human rights holds all persons equal. A prince, by definition, must believe himself superior, merely by virtue of birth, to the rest of us. Aah, the irony.)

On the 21st of June, the NSC sent a “team of lawyers” to Aluthgama to investigate the events, following which they wrote to the IGP. As we know, there are many exceptional Sri Lankan Muslim lawyers. This particular ensemble, however, failed to find any police, and therefore state, complicity with the attacks. Who, one wonders, did they interview? Multiple videos exist, easily accessible on the web, of Muslim property being destroyed during the curfew. Did these lawyers bother to watch? Even Seneviratne, usually a confused apologist for Sinhala nationalism, in one of his more inspired articles called upon the IGP to resign (though he might have wondered if the IGP himself followed orders – which could only have emanated from the defense secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa).

It gets worse. A July 6th NSC statement finds the Muslims “a minority, which stood in its entirety

with the Sinhala majority in the country's struggle to defeat the LTTE." This insidious, counter-factual formulation deliberately produces the Muslims, in opposition to the Tamils, as the good minority. It asks, cunningly, without actually saying so: we supported you against the Tamils; why batter, besiege us now?

Because a strategy of you kiss my ass and I'll kiss yours does not work with the Rajapaksas. They follow a different logic: you kiss my ass, I'll kick yours.

*

One could, if one wanted to, understand these statements, and others from the ACJU, Muslim Council and so on, as the product of fear. Perhaps. They are better read, I submit, as the expression of class interest. Since 1948, the southern Muslim elite and its political representatives have consistently, cravenly, nauseatingly acceded to Sinhala nationalist dominance of Sri Lanka (thus eventually necessitating the SLMC, which emerged from the east). They hardly, if ever, protested the war against the Tamils. The NSC doesn't offer an alternative to such "leadership"; it is, if possible, an even more cowardly iteration of it.

In striking contrast to our elite, an unnamed subaltern Muslim in Aluthgama, surveying the burnt ruins of his/her and many other houses, told Thyagi Ruwanpathirana: "this must've been what Jaffna looked like." This Muslim, at least, knows we are not alone.

In its desperation to avoid confronting the problem, the NCS, echoing Farook, deludes itself that the BBS represents "a minority of the majority." Yet, those who've studied the phenomenon, like Kalana Senaratne and Chaminda Weerawardhana, find the BBS hugely popular among Buddhists of all socio-economic classes. In fact, Senaratne reports that the group's renown increased exponentially after Aluthgama.

Something reinforced by the fact that 22 other organizations, including the almost century old All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, have joined it in a press release that states, among other things, that "none of the speakers made any rabble-rousing speeches encouraging attack [sic] on Muslims" at the June 15th meeting. Wow, the irony. The release blames the Information Department for imposing "news censorship," which in turn enabled "unscrupulous and mischievous anti-Sinhala Buddhist elements to make wildly exaggerated false accusations thus damaging the country's reputation as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society." To repeat: Sri

Lanka does not have such a reputation. And it will not gain one, either, if such Buddhist groups express concern purely for this fictive reputation – and not a single word of regret for the Muslim deaths and damage.

*

Following the 2013 demolition of the Fashion Bug warehouse just outside Colombo, by a group that included monks, the police actually gave the owner the option of pressing charges. The perpetrators were caught on tape, clearly identifiable. Under pressure, he refused. The state should have indicted them anyway, that's its job. So, I wonder: if those responsible then were jailed, would Aluthgama have happened?

Let me be clear: I do not blame the Fashion Bug owner for the attacks, the product of the collusion of BBS and state. But...

In the name of safeguarding our businesses, we let our businesses get destroyed.

In the name of protecting our lives in the future, we let them be ended in the present.

There will be no limit to our grief, our agony, our fear, if we keep supplicating protection from the same state that demands our subordination.

*

Taking the state a step further, the bloody bullshitter Gnanasara seeks our elimination, as he made clear during his now infamous Aluthgama speech: "After today if a single Marakkalaya or some other paraya touches a single Sinhalese...it will be their end." The state should have arrested him immediately for issuing death threats – not under the PTA, a law that should never have been enacted, but the regular penal code. On the other hand, we know the Rajapaksas have Gnanasara's back, politically, ideologically and otherwise. If uncertain before, we know now for sure.

Despite being chilled to the very marrow of my bones upon reading that statement, which promises massacre, I submit that we have something to learn from it. In saying he doesn't want the Sinhalese to be touched by the Muslim, or other parayas, Gnanasara admits to being touched already – metaphorically speaking. My point is not that he doesn't recognize Sri Lanka as a multi-

ethic/religious/cultural country, populated by many discrete social groups that must learn co-existence. I don't, either, for reasons detailed here. Rather, that our very conception of subjectivity needs revision: it gets marked, constituted, not only by ourselves but by the other – who is inside, not just outside us. You can't be a Muslim in Sri Lanka without being touched, affected, by the Tamil, Sinhalese, Burgher and so on. The same holds for the other subjectivities.

We could, like Gnanasara, or the LTTE for that matter, seek to annihilate such marking; or, we could foreground it. Learn to listen to the other both inside and outside us.

If this account of subjectivity sounds puzzling, counter-intuitive, some examples may help. The NSC statement explicitly produces the Muslim (good minority) in opposition to the Tamil (bad). At the most straightforward level, this finds the Tamil and Muslim discrete, different. But one could read it differently: in a formulation addressed to the Sinhalese, the Muslim gets defined as not-Tamil. I am what I am (Muslim); I am also, paradoxically, what I am not (Tamil). In that sense, the assertion of Muslim subjectivity by the NSC gets marked, “touched” by the Tamil and Sinhalese.

In an analogous situation in Myanmar, the 969 of Ashin Wirathu, Gnanasara's anti-Muslim buddy, say they named their organization in response to the Islamic 786. (The 969 refers to the nine virtues of the Buddha, the six of the dhamma and nine of the sangha. The last without irony. The 786, to the number of Arabic letters in 'Bismillahu Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem.') Without 786, there would, could be no 989. In that sense, the former not just marks but prompts the latter.

*

We are taught – interpellated is the better word – to understand our subjectivity as discrete, opposed to others. We could work to change that; though not by ourselves alone.

We could cling to our narrow, narcissistic subjectivities. But think where nationalism, identity politics have brought us. That maybe what we are. Is that what we want to be?

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Vangeesa Sumanasekara · 7 days ago



As always, beautifully written and seductively argued piece by Quadri. But I fear that his general proposal is dangerously close to a politically useless discourse of liberal multiculturalism, where we all recognize the moments of cultural intersections and the influences we have had from other cultures. I do not mean that this is a bad thing but just that I don't see it as a politically salient concept. Politics, for me, - and I am here following the ideas of many others, most notably the thought of Jacques Ranciere - is something very rare, something that happens only in a handful of moments in an otherwise mundane history dominated by authoritarian states and political oligarchies. In this regard I think the political hope for Sri Lanka remains to be the Tamil nationalist struggle, in spite of its many drawbacks, including the blood-stained horror of the LTTE and its continuing questionable strategies, as Quadri deftly points out - a unified front of Tamils, Muslims and the progressive elements of the the Sinhalese, standing for radical equality. Highly unlikely, yes, but is there any other way?

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georgethebushpig · 6 days ago

This an excellent article and it raises some uncomfortable truths that the Muslim community ought to consider very seriously. Acquiescence has unfortunate consequences. When the ACJU decided to sit down with BBS to discuss the halal issue it was a fatal error, just like the decision of the No Limit owner not to press charges on the yellow robed skinheads. Once the forces of repression are unleashed no one can fly under the radar and expect to escape. Sri Lankans regrouping around the basic principles of common decency and sense can be a powerful counter to the racist revival. Exposing the internal contradictions within the diverse Sri Lankan communities is a first step. Well done Qadri Ismail, Kalana Senaratne and Chaminda Weerawardhana.

Regards

GTBP

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AnandLeo · 6 days ago

Appreciate the broad perspective of the discourse. I am surprised that after the end of 25 year conflict with Tamil population in the north a new conflict has sprung up in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese and the Muslim communities up and down the country. Naturally the context of the report is unsavoury. From the point of view of international audience of Groundviews, I think the international community has left Sri Lanka to resolve the human problems of their sovereign nation especially in the wake of elimination of the indomitable LTTE.

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Senaratne · 5 days ago

If it was upto people like you, we'd be still "talking" nonsense and equality with those tamil terrorists all the while being blown to bits on buses and trains!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



James Chance · 2 days ago

A brilliant deconstruction - political and theoretical - of the mutually-assured destruction that Sri Lanka - and all - ethnic identity politics brings with it. Bravo also for taking on the National Shooru Council, whose statements continue the long history of trying to please the same mafia godfathers (who pose as civil servants) who extort political support by fear even as they fail to offer the protection they promise. If Muslims in Sri Lanka are ever to be safe, this policy of "supplication" must end. But Dr. Qadri is wise to see that the answer isn't a policy of robust "Muslim" self-assertion. Instead, it has to be one that highlights and exploits the deep interconnections between what appear to be discrete communities and identities. In a wonderfully sad irony, some of the greatest resources for Qadri's alternative politics of non- and mutually-"touched" identities are in fact that teachings of the Buddha. But translating this into a pragmatic politics will be an enormous challenge, as it is everywhere in the world, and as Vangessa Sumanaskera has suggested already in a prior comment. But the wisdom of Qadri's analysis is nonetheless a good guide: do everything not to box yourself and your families into a single box of communal identity - this may look like it gives you more protection, but it actually renders you more vulnerable. And this goes for Sinhalese and Tamils as well. And the Americans and Russians, Israelis and Palestinians, Hindus and Muslims, Christians and ... and the list goes on...

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