

# **TRIBE, NATION AND ASSIMILATION OF NATIONS**



**Vickramabahu Karunarathne**



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By

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## Preface

This is a modest attempt to present the formation of nations within an historical context. Dialectical method is thus employed to understand the development of nations in general, and in particular the problem of nationalities in Sri Lanka.

This attempt was made in 1983, when we were driven underground by the present regime. We were living under extremely difficult conditions with limited resources. Hence the work was limited by those constraints. Though certain additions were made, present edition remains close to the original booklet.

I am greatly indebted to my close associate Vasudeva Nanayakkara for the valuable discussions and suggestions, and for the remarkable sinhala translation he put together. I am also indebted to Tilak for all the incessant persuasions he made.

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## Introduction

History shows how the elite and ruling classes in every society have been manipulating the masses by indoctrinating them about their racial back-ground, culture, tradition etc. for the benefit of the elite and ruling classes. In the first part of the booklet the author analyses how nations were born commencing from the days when men lived in a tribal society, pointing out that the development of capitalism is a major factor that led to the formation of the various nations. In the second part of the booklet, the author analyses the history of Sri Lanka in this perspective, explaining how the nationalism grew up in this country. Here he shows how people with a common racial background have been separated into two distinct ethnic groups and are made to believe that they are descendents of entirely different races, by the manipulation of the ruling classes, for their personnel benefits.

The author's analysis how the nations were born is interesting and gives a lot of food for thought to the reader. The people of this country have seen its history distorted by the elite and intelligensia in their self interest, and this has only widened the gap between the different ethnic groups in the country. The authors analysis of the history of the people of Sri Lanka is very revealing. It is most welcome that this booklet is being published at a time when ethnic problems have seriously disrupted the economic social, political and cultural life in the country. I am sure that it will help in the narrowing the gap between the different ethnic groups, make them understand each other better, and work together jointly for the upliftment of the masses in this country.

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# PART I

## GENERAL DEVELOPMENT

### 1. Man Separates Himself from the Animal World

At early stages, that is in the time of pre history, man lived in small close knit groups. Such a group was just a little more than a pack. "When the differentiation of hand from foot and erect gait were finally established after thousands of years of struggle," two things separated them from other apes. Firstly, they could coherently communicate with each other. Secondly they were aware of time and hence, of birth and death. and they consciously participated in history. This means they had an understanding of the continuity of their species and could remember the experience of the group as a whole. Thus, they could share their experiences and pass it on to the next generation. Also, they remembered their dead by placing tombstones where the corpses were buried. Their language, however, was limited and often the groups who roamed the neighbouring areas had many words in common. Language was a new barrier that has arisen within the same species. Such a thing does not exist in the animal world, not even among apes. They have smells, sounds and signs. But these are the same for the same species; at least the differences for different packs in the same vicinity, are negligible.

Memory and sense of time is also a dimension that brought in a new cohesion and on the other hand a new division. For an animal the sense of familiarity is based on the immediate sensory perception, and this is easy to acquire as well as allow to lapse. Where as the common experience conceived and remembered by the humans, bound families and tribes more closely and kept them together. On the other hand, it separated those with whom one had



disputes and conflicts. History, even in the unwritten form was a great source of unity as well as of division. Thus the very emergence of Man from the animal kingdom brought in two elements of division and separation within the same species; the language and the history.

## 2. Surplus, the "course" of Mankind

Then, man went into tool making and acquiring new skills. There were artificial enclosures and man made shades, paints and garments, which created a separate culture around each group. Culture was not only a divider, it also pushed the group which accidentally acquired certain skills earlier, ahead of others. Skills and tools made surplus possible. That is, a man in one day could create usable things, more than necessary for him and his dependents daily use. Of course, for this to happen a social being was necessary, as skills and technology never develop in isolation. In other words, a group could produce usable things in excess of their daily necessity. This surplus was the beginning of exploitation, the "curse" of mankind. "The increase of production in all branches - cattle breeding, agriculture, domestic handicraft - enabled human labour power to produce more than was necessary for its maintenance. At the same time, it increased the amount of work that daily fell to the lot of every member of the gens or household community or single family. The addition of more labour power became desirable. This was furnished by war; captives were made slaves". Dawn of civilization brought the "fall" of man, from a being living in harmony and equality to a being who would take slaves from one's own kind.

Tribes, even before civilization, that is before surplus corrupted them into exploitation, did fight with each other. Basically these clashes were for territories or hunting grounds. Also, there would have been wars over women if there was scarcity of females due to migration or some natural calamity. How did they resolve these tribal conflicts and what were the outcome of these wars? At that stage



the victor had no use of the vanquished. Except of course in few cases where they would resort to cannibalism. If the vanquished were spared of such a hideous end, they are integrated into the victor. Otherwise they were driven away, to look for a new settlement elsewhere. However the point that is relevant here is that if the two tribes coexisted after a conflict then only way out was full integration. There was no case of caste or class differences, as such divisions are impossible in a savage society without the potential for the creation of a surplus. Obviously the victorious tribe would impose their way of life and their language on the defeated. However, naturally, there will be a growth of the language and the customs by such integrations. After a time, they all will be kith and kin without any trace of differences.

Surplus changed all that. With new technology in hand the victor did not chase away the vanquished. That was not necessary. Neither they were fully integrated. On the contrary the purpose of making war went beyond annexing territory or plunder. Taking others as slaves became an end in itself. Time to time parties or groups of armed men would go into neighbouring regions just for the purpose of bringing in slaves. Now, in a territory there were the ruling class belonging to one linguistic, and to large extent, one ethnic group and the slaves from other tribes. In addition there will be mixed groups with intermediary social positions. The tendency now is not for intergration but rather for keeping the differences as accentuated as possible. "The interest of the groups of craftsmen created by division of labour and the special needs of the town as opposed to the country required new organs; but each of these groups was composed of people from different gentes, phratries and tribes; they even included aliens. Hence, the new organs necessarily had to take from outside the gentile constitution, parallel with it and that meant against it". There will be a standing army with all key positions and the arsenals in the hands of the dominating class. The language and the culture of the dominating will grow at the expense of the dominated.



Individual family records may become important to keep the identity of the elite intact. The territory and the state will go by the name of the dominating group which is now a social class rather than an ethnic or racial entity.

### **3. The Slave Owning Society**

Most of the societies of the antiquity in the Mediterranean and in Asia were slave owning societies. Whether it was open slavery or the latent slavery of the strong caste system of early times, there was the distinct elite which ruled and whose making the society was. They had identity and cohesion. Below them were the others of subject races without cohesion or identity. No, they had an identity. Not of ethnic or linguistic nature but of being dominated; those who slaved for others. These exploited masses who had no rights or had only a bare minimum of it, were of different races and spoke different languages. However, soon, in the course of a few generations they lost their background and knew only what they were supposed to know. Perhaps they still had their languages in residual forms. While all new words associated with the growth of culture were from the language of the dominating elite. It was same with customs and rituals. Only rudimentary forms of their customs and culture existed among these subject races.

As these states expanded into empires, subject races of new territories were allowed to continue their nomadic or subsistence agricultural existence while they were kept as a pool for the supply of slave labour. In these regions the state expanded as the instrument of colonisation, and it provided the protection for the elite or the slave owners who moved into these areas to expand their enterprises. The language of administration, trade and education was, naturally, the language of the ruling class of people, which was enriched by the other languages. It was the language of power and influence.



#### 4. Early Asiatic Societies,

Early Asiatic societies, strictly speaking, were not based on slavery. Slave had a status which can be changed by the master within the accepted laws of the society. Hence the condition of the slave dependent on the enforcement. Physical force and the exact master-slave relationship was very important. Conditioning of the slave by social codes and practices was of lesser importance than the direct enforcement by the master and those who controlled the slaves. On the other hand in Asiatic societies the people who did menial work belonged to the lower castes. Man cannot change his caste except when a person of higher caste is thrown out as a punishment. At early stages the caste structure was based on ethnic differences. The races that were subjugated were considered to be of lower castes or simply outcasts. Caste condition was clearly a social condition which was enforced by the society as a whole. Enforcement was, largely, left to social practices. Separation of classes was kept intact by rigid sets of social norms which were an integral part of the religious practices of those times.

All agricultural property, the real wealth of the society belonged to the state or the king. In addition irrigation using river water (or tanks) was controlled by the state through paid state officials. Hence even the workers of lower castes, worked for the state and the division was according to the duties they performed. There was very little of individual master-slave relationship. To a large extent, socio-religious practices relieved the ruling elite of direct physical subjugation and enforcement. There was a common religion with God presented to each caste in different form. It was the wish of the God that man plays different roles in society and worship him in different forms, segregated from each other.

As long as there were no external threats, wars and physical conflicts, this caste from of latent slavery was remarkably stable as seen from the societies that existed in river valleys throughout North India. It was a very con-



servative society retaining tradition largely based on mother culture, and gods and goddesses of war had positions of lesser importance. However these societies collapsed immediately in the face of an external attack. Where as a direct slave society was a regimented military society. Direct enforcement necessitated an organised army, and intern, there it was possible to use slaves as second rank soldiers. However once this early Asiatic societies of India were over run by invading Aryan hordes, for a period caste itself developed into a form of semi slavery with Kshasthiriya caste performing the function of a standing Army.

### **5. Assimilation Among Slave Owners**

Among slave owning states social intercourse was confined to the ruling groups. Such social intercourse whenever it took place between twostates, developed the culture of both and also changed the racial characteristics of both groups. What happened in the case of a conflict or a war? Obviously the defeated state disintegrates leaving both the ruler and the ruled at the mercy of the conquerer. But the subjugated elite class now has a culture and language which will not die out in the course of one or two generations. In addition, the influence of the subjugated elite on the triumphant ruling class is considerable and of significance. Hence under this influence the ruling class changes both culturally and ethnically. Still, the lower castes or the slave people remain at their elementary stage having only a trace of a culture. The ruling class, though has changed considerably by assimilation, will continue to identify themselves by the original racial stock.

Defeat and loss of territory bring more racial inter-mixing than victory. A defeated slave owning society, if abandoned or drivenout and dispered by the victor, will have to fall back to a more primitive kind of living: subsistence agriculture or nomadic animal husbandary. Under the new circumstances relationship between the master and the slave has to change. Very often slave



classes will acquire the language and culture of masters and integrate fully to form a single tribe or a society of communal villages. Thus entirely a new stock is formed within the identity of the slave owners, inheriting the legends, myths and the remnants of the culture. This culture itself in turn will degenerate considerably in going through the new phase of primitivism.

## **6. Ethnicity Within Feudal States.**

In Europe the very expansion of culture and spread of civilization brought the downfall of the slave owning empires. An entirely new relationship between the ruler and the ruled was necessary. The growth of technology in agriculture and animal husbandary, necessitated a new type of workers who are more interested in the plot of land they worked and payed more attention to the flock and herds they looked after. This was the origin of feudalism. But what is important here is the change of racial and linguistic categories in this process. In a feudal unit there was wider understanding between the ruler and the ruled. Though these who ruled may be of a different ethnic and racial stock from those of the servant classes, now there is a common spoken language and the communication has increased between the two groups. Serfs would identify readily with the country, the clan and the state of the feudal lords. Spoken language will be common to everybody though there would be a written language of the cultured, confined to the ruling class.

Far more important is the role of the religion. Slave of yesterday, who is now released from the physical bonds, is bound by the religion and faith. Earlier the religion of the master did not penetrate the slaves and infact it was necessary to have different religions to enhance the differences. Often, while the slave owner concentrated on theology and abstract philosophy, the slave was confined to rituals and demonology. Any religion that preaches the equality of mankind was definitely dangerous to the slave-owning establishment. Hence, such religions expan-



ded their influence only with the fall of slave empires. And these became the religions of everybody in the new society, for both the lord and the serf. Thus new factors of common identity were replacing the earlier forms. Religion and linguistic culture are more characteristic of a united people than purely racial and ethnic connections. Serfs were educated by the lords to believe that somehow they both belong to the same people and the first loyalty of a serf lies with his "own" lord. With religion and language as instruments, feudal lords were able to bring together many subjugated people into one kingdom. After a conquest, the defeated ruling class was assimilated by the victorious ruling class (was assimilated by the victorious ruling class) with the former acting as the intermeadeary which re-educated their own servant classes.

With feudalism, a people identified by a common religion and a spoken language, becomes a more resilient entity. The feudal bond established over the agricultural land, sanctioned by the language and the religion, created cohesive groups which did not disperse even under major defeats. To break up these new social structures; subtle and protracted methods had to be utilized.

It is clear that even under feudalism, long before the advent of capitalism, racially and ethnically very mixed people took the identity inherited by the elite. furthermore their language which sometimes had only a distant connection to the original, continued to be identified by the old name. Still, this common identity did not create a nation. Also, culture and history remained exclusive interest of the ruling class. Feudal lords living in neighbouring territories and kingdoms and of equal level of development, were more interested in friendly social intercourse than in wars of domination. Nevertheless such intermixing produced disputes of inheritance of property, titles and rulership. If the levels of development are far apart, with entirely different religions laying bare these differences, there were continuous wars. At the same time such wars brought neighbouring states of equal level of development close together.



## 7. Drum Beaters of Nations

It was the development of capitalism which propelled the loose identity that existed under feudalism to the stage of present day identity of a nation. So the term "nation" can be used properly, only today, for people living under market economies. The ruling class under capitalism, the bourgeoisie, is deeply interested in developing a large society, bound by common language and territory, in constant cultural and social intercourse. This is a necessity of a system where the production and the distribution are based on a market. Now, it is important that even the servant classes have certain literacy and culture. Hence at the beginning, the bourgeoisie ties the proletariat in a national concept which will, while sweeping away all traces of racial and hereditary traits of citizens in a country, makes them forget the class conflict and joins and wields them together in a national interest. The small producer, the petty bourgeoisie, plays the most important role in developing such a national movement led by the bourgeoisie. Bourgeoisie, educated the entire society to believe in a nation, based on a national history and culture; and creates a cohesive unit which surpasses ideological unity brought about by hitherto all ruling classes. "The bourgeoisie appeals to its 'native folk' and begins to cry out about the 'fatherland', claiming that its own cause is the cause of the nation as a whole. It recruits itself an army from among its 'countrymen' in the interest of.....the "fatherland" Nor do the 'folks' always unresponsive to its appeals, they rally around its banner: the repression from above affects them also and provokes their discontent".

It is interesting to see how petty commodity producers that grew in the feudal society, became the staunchest exponents of nationalism. As the capitalist mode of production developed, an entire literature was produced on the basis of nationalism for the ready petty bourgeoisie readership. Nation is not only a distinct set of people bound together by a common language and culture, but



also a definite territory, ie, a motherland. The beauty and the greatness of soil, so closely associated with the rural middle class, is also a part of nationalism.

Feudalism always allowed, independent small producers both in agriculture and in manufacture. In addition, there were traders and merchants. Cities, in addition to being the administrative centres of the feudal state, were the centres for the activities of these people. This led to rapid development of a language and culture, distinct and separate, in each country. Expansion of capitalist production necessitated a unified market and that means the unification of all people in adjacent territories with a common language and culture, into a single large unit. It is the rural agricultural producer and the urban manufacturer that vehemently fight for the unification and on the other hand detest foreign influences. They want a ready market for their goods; without obstacles to the movement of goods and without competition from better products from other lands. The common spoken language and the common set of customs and practices, spread by the feudal lords among the people whom they ruled, were the initials for the origin of the new identity, the nation. While the feudal state now becomes an obstacle to the growth of the nation, whose driving force is the capitalist mode of production.

Capitalist ideologist excelled in everything done by previous ruling classes. "All legends and myths relate to the system of social relationships which operates in a society and to the values and sanctions which upholds that system. The implications is that myths and legends may become extinct, that their prominence may vary from time to time and that old elements may get incorporated into new myths. In short, as society changes so do myths and legends". Bourgeoisie did not hesitate to utilize every myth and legend it can lay hands on. An assortment of oppressed people with different ethnic and racial background that lived in a neighbourhood, but with a common spoken language, were taught to believe that they are the decedents of a race that lived in that territory from times



immemorial. Various heroic deeds of "their ancestors" to defend the land and the race are related to them with added lustre. In other words, legends and heritage of hitherto all ruling classes are re-constructed in most romantic and vivid forms and thrown down the throats of the children of slaves, serfs and the oppressed. They are made to believe that they are the proud inheritors of all that is even vaguely associated with those who ever ruled in that land. Thus bourgeois nationalism is the biggest hoax played on exploited people. Racial and communal inheritance as claimed by bourgeois writers is simply a lie. There cannot be racial inheritance when there was no continuity of pure races or ethnic groups. Each exploiting, ruling class inherited the legends and chronicles of the predecessor and retold these in a form best suited to their form of society. The acme of this process was the Romantic Bourgeois nationalism, where a ruling class which (also) had very little racial or ethnic connection to the previous dominating classes, developed a history and culture linking directly not only itself but others too, with early rulers. Bourgeois production and distribution necessitated an administration, a set of legislations, a communication system and an implementation process which brought people of a large state together in a social intercourse that was entirely new and extensive. Bourgeois nationalism was the thread that kept this giant structure together.

## **8. Negation of the Nation**

Further development of the bourgeois system took the bourgeoisie beyond national barriers to the stage of imperialism of monopoly capitalism. Vast territories inhabited by different people belonging to different clans, races and cultures were brought together into one state. Incipient nations were wiped out and forced to integrate with the dominating nation. Very nature of capitalism made culture and heritage available to the ordinary masses. Unlike in previous societies where literary and cultural spread was confined to the ruling elites, now entire people were drawn into social and cultural activities at least at a



minimum level. Universities and other cultural institutes, mass media, etc. produced a new middle layer, the intelligensia, which recruited members from all classes. Of course it was dominated by the bourgeoisie recruits. This intelligensia was the engine of cultural expansion. In all subjugated domains, the intelligensia was completely moulded according to the needs of the imperialist power. They acted as the unifying force integrating all people under the hegemony of the imperialist bourgeoisie. Such assimilation was considered as the process of civilization.

This was successful as long as capitalism was expanding. Particularly in the latter part of 19th century when imperialist powers still acted under the idea of a "concert of Europe." It was the growth of the working class with the need to satisfy the advanced workers of the mother country and the development of national movements with the growth of capitalism in colonies that forced the imperialist bourgeoisie to increase national oppression and enhance division among the subject people. Thus imperialist bourgeoisie was unable to unify the entire ruling class within the empire, and to arrive at a subordinate homogeneous intelligensia. For example Ghandi wanted to be a proper English-speaking gentlemen. That was the initial trend within colonial upper classes. Internal crisis and conflicts within British imperialism did not allow this. Though imperialism brought together and integrated, vast varieties of people in common language and culture, it still had the basis limitations of an exploitative system.

Nevertheless, bourgeoisie of the oppressor nations at the stage of imperialism went against the very idea of a nation and the glory of nationalism that it expounded in its infancy. A united commonwealth of nations with one link language and a super culture, tied together by a common market was the ambition of the imperialist bourgeoisie. Racial and ethnic concepts that dominated the ideologies of hitherto all ruling classes, including itself in its immaturity, were thrown overboard for the sake of the unity of the class, brought together by a super culture,



rational ethics and pragmatic philosophy. Most developed was the Anglo Saxon bourgeoisie who was also the most successful in developing the idea of unity of nations. Such a unity to be achieved on the basis parliamentary democracy, federalism and a commonwealth.

However Imperialism has today come to its last stage Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie with its pragmatic ideology attempts to lead Imperialism and uses all the fat, accumulated over the years of prosperity, and all the cunning at its disposal, to continue this corrupt decaying system. It may pretend to go beyond racism, ethnic sectarianism and nationalism to arrive at a unity of all people. It may profess to stand for self government, voluntary federalism and democracy, but in reality it has to move against all these concepts to stand by savage barbaric dictatorships, communal and ethnic discrimination and racial violence. Internationalism of the imperialist bourgeoisie too is a hoax exposed to the exploited masses of the world in every international conference, whether it is a general meeting of IMF or the United Nations general council.

## **9. End of nation, "Workers of the World Unite!"**

Racial and ethnic violence ceases to exist when the class which has no interest in perpetuating myths and pseudo history based on race concepts comes to rule the world. When the entire history of mankind is rewritten in its true form, in the context of class struggle and exploitation of man by man. A history of a people without taking into consideration which classes constituted this people and what interest these classes had, is pseudo history. Myths, legends and chronicles all have their value provide these are placed in the proper background and understood as the voices of various classes which came into prominence at different stages in the history of mankind. Hitherto all ruling classes presented history to suite their wishes. It is left to the victorious proletarian to write history from entirely new point of view; from



the point of view of those who so far had no opinion of their own but accepted legends and myths taught to them by the elite classes.

Proletariat will unite all people under the banner of socialism. Socialist humanism and socialist ethics will define the norms of social intercourse. It is very likely English language which is today fast becoming the most wide spread language of advance science, technology and arts; i.e., all advance knowledge, will be the link language and the language of the super culture of the proletariat. Even now, English is certainly the language of the advanced proletariat. This is so even though still the Russian revolution did not rapidly spread westwards since 1917. The attempt by the Russian bureaucracy to confine "socialism" to a limited area and dominate the people within, has created only resentment and protest with nationalist traits. This can be observed in east European countries. In particular the recent Polish 'nationalism' is not a revival of the old fashion bourgeois nationalism. On the contrary it is the resentment of a politically oppressed advanced proletariat against a confinement which separates them from the rest of the modern proletariat. Poles recent Russian which is really a sister language and prefer to learn English as second language not because of the influence of western imperialism but because of their eagerness keep abreast with advance ideas. On the other hand Russian is seen by them as the language of the usurper bureaucracy and not as an international language. All these are the expression of an advance society yearning for fulfilment.

The unbending faith in the future of mankind with ethics and morals of collective and communal living make the proletariat the real elite; the enlightened class. It is true that there are no morals for the class struggle. How can one conduct a ruthless war against an irreconcilable enemy except on the basis of one's victory as the only measure of good practice. Irreconcilable forces cannot agree on a common moral conduct to carry on the



struggle. However this does not mean there are no morals and ethics for the proletariat or for the future society. On the contrary already in history most magnificent selfless sacrifice and goodness has shown by none other than the fighters for socialism. Their intensity of faith in the ability of mankind to overcome social and natural barriers and to build a society of happiness with mutual consideration, has surpassed that of all religious faiths put together, though the latter produced the fabulous cultures of previous generations. It is a social movement with such a faith that will build the just and civilized society of the future. "Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence and enjoy it to the full."

## PART 2

### NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKA

At the time of the supposed arrival of Aryan people from North India to this island between 6th and 3rd century B. C., those who lived here belonged to the South Indian Megalithic culture. It was a tribal society based on small tanks-villages. "This was an intrusive culture thought to have originated, on the basis of recent discoveries, in the Nubian region which came into South India sometime after 500 B. C. It was metal using, with implements chiefly of iron. A settlement had four distinct areas; a habitation area, a cemetery, a tank and fields." Dravidians who build the fabulous cities of Mohenjaro - Harappa and taught the Normadic Aryan invaders how to irrigate with dams and canals, had shifted to the South, and the South Indian Megalithic culture may have had descended from them. At the same time there might have been other more primitive people, some may be practising even cannibalism. With the advent of Aryan people there were in the island two or three distinct racial elements, with the more primitive people dark, short and stocky with kinky or curly hair probably the ancestors of Veddahs.



Before 250 B. C., eg. before Maurya Dynesty, Aryans could not have come in great number nor did they add much to the indigenous civilization. They also knew agriculture and may have started their traditional subsistence village societies based more on animal husbandary. They did not have proper kingship and their village communes were led by 'Gaminis'. Within a collection of villages one of the Gaminis may have had a superior position and be considered as the king. Aryans, unlike the indigenous islanders at the time of intrusions, were war like people and were better equipped with military technology. Their's was a patriarchical society as opposed to the mother god culture of Dravidian people.

By the 3rd. century B. C., Aryans, though they may have been a small clan in numbers, were able to dominate all others, probably because of their superior military knowledge. Village agricultural societies were united together, with the hunting tribes thrown in at the periphery to form a loose kingdom, with Sinhala people as the elite. Sinhala elite was a product of Aryan element mixed with the leading families of the indigenous tribes. Perhaps the story of Pandukabhaya in Mahawansa is the legendary version of this unification. In any case it is clear that at the beginning of the third century B.C., an Asiatic society with a division of labour, had started to develop.

However real dawn of civilization came with the introduction of Buddhism. Recorded history started with the elite acquiring a literate culture. Spread of Buddhism among the Sinhala Kshasthriya and other elite castes had a social significance. It means the development of the society from both small - tank village and dam - rivervalley culture to an organized large - tank culture. Large tank irrigation systems necessitated a centralized society with a finer division of labour. This could be achieved only by abandoning the strict semi racial caste divisions of the old Brahmanistic society, in place of a social division based more on the services of an irrigation system. Asoka's version of Theravada Buddhism provided the



ideology for this change. Thus Buddhism became the religion of the elite of the centralized agricultural society, where water management and maintenance of dams and canals was done by the state.

By studying the early cave inscriptions, it is claimed that the language of the people at the time of Devanampiyathissa was a variation of Magadha prakrutha. It is useful to compare this with the relationship between Roman - Latin and the language of the British people at the time of the Roman empire. Obviously at this early stages the language of culture will be very different from the common spoken language understood by both the elite and the lower classes. In addition there will be several languages confined to the subjugated different tribes. Hence it is reasonable to assume that the common spoken language at that time (250 B. C.) from which Sinhala language developed later, at least to be a simple language highly influenced by Dravidian languages of the South Indian Megalithic people, if not, a language with a Dravidian origin. It is most probable that the Sinhala language developed, from this spoken language of the common folk, along the Pali Sanskrit line and departed from the rest of Dravidian languages due to the continuous influence of Buddhism. This can be seen by following the next stages of development.

## **2. First wave of Dravidian invasions**

In the Buddhist society everybody was equal before the state and all property, in particular the land belong to the state. Caste based on ethnic and racial differences was done away with. However in place of that, there developed the caste separation based on crafts and professions associated with the agricultural society rooted in a centralized irrigation system. Cultured elite classes, were paid officers of the state while the peasantry gave a share to the state coffers and also gave free labour for constructions and services of the state, during off season. Peasantry and the other lower classes were



predominantly of non - Aryan origin. Hence most words used in paddy cultivation and other work in village life entered the common spoken language from the Dravidian dialect used by them. Their religion, the religion of the lower classes, even if claimed to be Buddhism, must have incorporated the rituals and the demonology of their ancestors.

The first and second Dravidian invasions came in 3rd century B. C. Sinhala elite was displaced and majority of them were forced to take refuge in the South. In partial hiding they fell back to the old form of communal villages. They lost in touch with their culture and Magadha Prakrit literacy decayed. This Ruhunu society, which consisted of kshasthriya villages and few tribal groups, was more or less a subsistence society without a surplus to sustain a culture. In this situation, social and ethnic mixing created an almost homogeneous group of people identified by the Sinhala language and the remnants of Buddhist ideology and culture.

In the meantime, the Dravidian elite at Anuradhapura attempted to organize the society in the form that existed in South India at that time. With their irrigation know how, small tanks and dams were improved at the expense of the centralized irrigation system. This would have made them popular among the lower classes while the surplus depreciated. Buddhism was left out as it went against the structure of the society. Whatever the surplus that was created was not used to create a culture here. It must have been taken to South India by the Tamil ruling classes.

Prince Gamini was a prominent village leader of the Sinhalese people that elked out an existance in Ruhunu. He mobilized, this defeated and driven out people to win back the control of the irrigated land that their fore-fathers helped to develop around Anuradhapura. His victory created for the first time a Sinhala speaking elite and it was after this victory that a fully developed



centralized irrigation - agricultural society was formed with Buddhism as its ideology.

The Buddhist monk Mahanama who wrote Mahavanse, devotes most of it to this epic story of how Sinhala elite brought all people inhabited this island under its domination and established itself at the apex of an Asiatic state structure. The language of the literate, was 'Sinhala' Prakrit, a derivation of the Magadha Prakrit that was in use before the fall of the Sinhala regime. However the spoken language common to all was a further development of Sinhala. There might have been use of other languages, including those still used by the tribes who lived at the periphery of the regime. Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that even the spoken language Sinhala, understood by all lower classes was very different from the 'Sinhala' Prakrit of the educated.

### **3. Root cause of the Aryan myth.**

What separated the Sinhala Kingdom from the rest of the regimes in the Southern India was not racial or ethnic differences. Even in the immediate post Gamini period there could not have been any ethnic difference between the people of lower classes including the peasantry in the Southern Indian Kingdoms and in the Sinhala Kingdom. They were mostly, the descendants of the people of South Indian Megalithic culture. Even if one assumes that people of Ruhuna led by Gamini had a strong Aryan component it is very unlikely they were any different from the Kshathriya elites that dominated the Southern Indian Kingdoms. Thus overall ethnic composition could not have been very different and in any case over the years, differences would have dissolved away

But there was a social difference between the Sinhala Kingdom and the South Indian Kingdoms. Sinhala Kingdom was based on large tank and centralized irrigation culture. It needed the Buddhist ideology for its survival. State ownership of property and division of the society along



state services necessitated a religion which rationalized the social composition of such a society. It has to be an organized religion with a common direction to all citizens. Where as the South Indian states were based on small tank villages with Brahminism as the religion of the elite.

Buddhist ideology was responsible for the separate development of the Sinhala elite and the distinct culture and the language. Sinhala remained, or rather developed as a language close to Pali - Sanskrit due to the influence of Theravada Buddhism, which constantly waged a war against the resurgence of Pre Brahministic South Indian religious traditions based on mother culture and polythesism. Latter raised its head under the guise of Mahayana and the worship of Bodhisatwa, and remained popular among the lower classes. Thus whenever the centralized state was weak, worship of gods goddesses and Bodhisatwa became popular, so much so, many rulers tried to accommodate this trend instead of fighting it.

Brahminism of South India, on the other hand, was very accommodating. It incorporated all gods and rituals of the earlier era within it, to become a supple complex system suitable to the complex and varied agricultural society. Thus instead of liquidating the religious - cultural traditions of the South Indian Megalithic society, these were developed and taken forward with a sprinkling of Sanskrit - Brahministic traditions. "The Hinduization of the South was, however, of a different order from that of the North, and the culture imported by the Brahmins remained no more than a thin veneer over the traditional patterns of society. The mass of people retained its animistic cults and polyandry; and matriarchy, unknown in the North, still survived. The caste system was only accepted in a modified form - with the Brahmin, naturally, and Sudra, and also the Parayan (or out caste), which was the Old South Indian stock. Kshatriya and Vaisya practically did not exist."



This then is a classic example of how a people with a common racial background are separated into two distinct groups and over the years educated by the ruling classes, as needed by social interests, to believe that they are the decedents of entirely different races.

#### **4. Fall of Anuradhapura.**

Hight of prosperity for Anuradhapura came during the first few centuries of the christian era. In this period even the language of the common man produced a certain amount of literary work. In particular there were number of popular poets. None of these works are available today. However, one can get a rough idea on the language used by studying the Sigiri writings of the 8th century A. D. Unlike Sinhala Prakrit; the language of the cultured elite Sinhala that emerges from these writings has a closer affinity, even in grammer, to South Indian languages

Collapes of Anuradhapura began with increase pressure from South India around the 7th century A. D. . Shift to Polonnaruwa was accompanied by the emergence of Sinhala as the language of the elite classes too with the demise of Sinhala Prakrutha. Also, both Hindu and Mahayana religious trends became significant. These were the result of the collapse of the centralized society connected with Anuradhapura irrigation complex and the decay of the ruling class. In 9th and 10th century instability and insecurity continued and the Sinhala ruling classes were incapable of any construction or building work of grandeur. They meglected the Pali - Sanskrit litriture associated mostly with Therawada Buddhism to pursue literary work in Sinhala, the language of the popular culture. Deterioration of the centralized irrigation - agricultural society broke the hold of Theravada Buddhism and reduced the influence of Aryan myths and legends. Sri Lanka was almost absorbed back to the South Indian civilization, which has now advanced under Dravidian elite classes.



In 1017 Sinhala elite was completely thrown out from its position of power. Some of them retreated to the South where they fell back to the agricultural commune system with only a caricature of kingship. Buddhism survived as a collection of rituals and practices while Sinhala language continued to improve at the expense of Pali - Sanskrit and 'Sinhala' Prakrit. With the collapse of the culture went, the language of the cultured: 'Sinhala' Prakrit. Struggle of Vijayabahu was the struggle of the Sinhala clan to take back the kingdom. After the victory they proceeded to reorganise the centralized state. They had to depend on friendly Dravidian elites to improve their knowledge in irrigation and state craft. Thus several elite groups from South India were invited here.

It was Parakramabahu - I who completely revitalized the centralized state with large scale irrigation system. Theravada Buddhism was given the prime of place and the influence of Mahayana and other ritualistic trends were weeded out. However these trends must have continued among the ordinary people. Mahayana and other trends which incorporated deities and symbols, always represented the ideological needs of the peasantry and other lower classes. In South India, Hinduism represented the compromise between the ruling elite and the peasant classes; where as Theravada Buddhism revived only with the uncompromised supremacy of Sinhala elites of the centralized state. Similarly, though at this time both South India and Sri Lanka were under the influence of Sanskrit scholars, there was no structural change in the Dravidian languages and the influence remained superficial. Where as, a complete change took place in written Sinhala resulting almost an entirely new language : "Mixed Sinhala."

While Buddhism and Sanskrit oriented Sinhala gave a clear identity to the people within the Sinhala Kingdom, which separated them from the people within Dravidian Kingdoms, there was continues social and cultural intercourse between the Sinhala and Dravidian elites. There were inter - marriages and in disputes they were seeking



each others help. Parakramabahu - I was really a Panddyan prince with a weak connection to Vijayabahu - I. Thus while there was intermixing among the elite classes, who may have had real ethnic differences, the ordinary people of lower classes who were of the same racial stock were made to develop as different nationalities.

## **5. End of Rajarata Civilization.**

Kalinga Magha who invaded the Island in 1215 realized that as long as there exists a Sinhala elite capable of resurrecting the complex irrigation system, subjugation will not be complete. He must have arrived at this by studying the struggle between the last few Kalinga kings and the Sinhala elite classes. He was quite successful in decimating the Sinhala elite. After this invasion the centralized agrarian society never recovered and the village agricultural system became the dominant factor in Rajarata areas including that of the Jaffna peninsular. However, this invasion could not liquidate Theravada Buddhist clergy equipped with "Mixed Sinhala" literary tradition; they remained to continue the Sinhala identity.

Already, during the last part of the Polonnaruwa period there was a new development that was significant. Colonization of the south west of the island opened up a new branch of economic activity. It coincided with the coming of Arab and Chinese traders. Trade of ivory, elephants, spices, and gems which brought items essential to good life, competed with the peasant agriculture. In the wet zone, agriculture was organized on a different basis. Here a kind of semi feudalism, where landlordism coexisted with communal villages; replaced the centralized agriculture. As the agrarian unit "Gama" or the village replaced the organized colony or "Jana Padaya." Availability of rain throughout the year made, highly complicated water management both difficult and unnecessary. Also, the tradable crops and gems created the condition for private ownership. Peculiarity of the Asiatic centralized system was that it was exploitative without creating a significant concentration of private property.



During the days of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa centralized agriculture created the culture suitable to that system. There was an enormous surplus labour at off season which had to be directed for some useful purpose. Public work was one way out and decisions for such work had to be taken at the centre. No individual lord could privately patronize any art of grandeur and enormity. Also Theravada Buddhism created a strong sect which did not allow variations or art for pleasure. The monuments and stone works of that period were dictated by these constraints. It was not a promising climate for literary work of any sort except of religious and philosophical value. However the new society in the humid southern areas created very much the opposite conditions. No large scale monumental work could be undertaken when throughout the year people had work to do and the society was not so organized. On the other hand there were individual land owners or plutocrats who could patronize art. They were much interested in literary work where their names also could be mentioned with a word of praise. The degeneration of Theravada Buddhism created wandering monks who would succour any lord who could provide him with comforts.

## **6. Period of separate development.**

Thus, this new society created an entirely new kind of elite that claimed to be the Sinhalese. They supported the growth of prose and verse writing in a language highly influenced by the spoken Sinhala. "Saddharmalan-keraya" tradition which went against Sanskritized Sinhala of Parakramabahu era, by following a language close to the people, was a part of this new Sinhala culture. This new Sinhala elite had very little direct connection to the elite of the previous era and they had no claim to the so called Aryan high birth. In fact prose writings of this period show clearly their contempt for those who still claimed to such superior birth. This continued to be the society in Sinhala areas, when the European invaders arrived in the 16th century. By then the North and the East of the island



had become a part of the lands of Tamil elites though not all this area belonged to the kingdom of Jaffna. Vanni Lords, probably mostly Tamil, changed their allegiance between Jaffna and Sinhala Kingdoms depending on which is more powerful.

Rulers of Jaffna Kingdom, which began after Magha invasion always struggled to gain supremacy over the Sinhala Kings in the Southern regions. This means, since 13th century Sinhala and Tamil elites continuously fought each other to decide as to who should dominate, subjugate and exploit the people of this island. Latter in this entire period, whether in the North or in the South lived mostly in more or less independent communal villages which produced very little surplus. They had to support administrations and elite classes which in return could not bring much prosperity. Except during brief interludes there was very little culture created by any of the regimes of this period.

Jaffna elite was in a particularly bad situation. It was not possible to develop an advanced irrigation system in this arid land. In addition dependence on underground water compelled continuous hard work through out the year. Unlike for the Sinhala.

Rulers in the wet zone, there was no other wealth which they could exchange with foreign traders. Though for brief periods the Dravidian elite controlled large parts of the island, for most of its existence the Jaffna Kingdom was confined to the arid Northern tip of the island. This was the reason for not being able to build vast monuments or to create any other form of significant separate culture. There was no separate literature, music or drama. However Jaffna elite preserved early Tamil literature and dance forms; and produced chronicles and few other writings.

It was during this period of commerce and growth of private property that the Muslim enclaves and principalities were established along the coastal areas. Some of these were powerful enough to influence the politics of both Sinhala and Tamil Kingdoms.



Mass of peasants and other lower classes, who lived through out the island during 13th to 19th century, though divided into religious and linguistic groups according to the elite that ruled them, were of the same ethnic mixture with similar racial characteristics. Those who lived for generations in areas ruled mostly by Sinhala elite followed their masters while those in Tamil areas followed Tamil elites and spoke Tamil, followed Hindu rituals and customs. Same is true of Muslim areas. Even if there were some ethnic or racial differences among the ruling classes during the dawn of civilization, there could hardly be any difference today among the ordinary people who are a mixture of Dravidians, Aborigines, Hasamites and Aryans. Then, even among the latter day ruling classes there could not be racial differences; particularly after the Maga invasion. Sinhala elite of the last few hundred years had very little of Aryan ancestry to go by!

## **7. Struggle against the Western Invaders.**

In 1505 when portugese first came here the island was divided among number of kingdoms, principalities and cities. These states were divided according to the ruling elites; Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim. The language and culture was decided by the ruling elite and any new comers to the state, either through emigration or due to expansion of the state itself, were assimilated within a generation or two. As lower classes were backward with very little culture this was not very difficult. For example in the western coast of the island there were number of groups who were of recent arrivals from South India. They were mostly absorbed by the Sinhala and towards this process, the struggle against Europeans must have acted as a catalyst. Also, by 1815, Kandyan and low country Sinhala speaking people considered themselves to be two separate and distinct people. At that stage "Sinhale" was only the Kandyan areas. That means during the period of struggle, Kandyan ruling classes were the Sinhala, while lords of low country were busy trying to integrate with the foreign ruling elites, as it happened in Mexico and Peru.



However European invasions and endless series of vicious battles added an important factor to the development of identities within the Sri Lankan society. Hitherto the change of ruling elites did not alter the everyday life of the ordinary people. At least not so after the fall of Rajarata civilization. Now completely alien and foreign rule with strange ways of life was imposed on people. Assimilation and integration was slow, while cruelties of discrimination and humiliation were blatant. Under these circumstances masses identified closely with their local elites.

Gradually racial and ethnic identities got a new meaning. 'Sinhala' or 'Tamil' did not mean primarily and exclusively an identity of an elite any longer. These became popular identities placed within mass consciousness. The converse was true of Portuguese or Dutch or British. They were the aliens, including their local converts. Also, among the Sri Lankan masses the derogatory sense attached to 'Parangiya' 'Kerapoththa' was never associated with 'Sinhala' 'Demala' or 'Marakkalaya'. How could they, when they sought each others help in resisting the domination of European invaders? This new factor must have acted as a catalyst in the integration of the Dravidian groups in the western coast with Sinhalese and the Sinhala Vanni lords with the Jaffna Kingdom.

## **8. Sinhala and Tamil nations**

Both Tamil and Sinhala capitalism developed as auxiliaries to the British capitalism. Initially it was only a commercial capital, which later went into plantations, mining etc. As market forces developed different layers of petty producers and servicemen, were drawn into the market. Thus a new layer of bourgeoisie, a new elite, developed, which came into conflict with the establishment. It was this development that really created modern nationalism both of Sinhalese and Tamils. At first local bourgeoisie was essentially English speaking and cosmopolitan in outlook. Even if they were nominally Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims, in actual practice they followed the Anglican way of life.



As the conflict with the establishment intensified, the national bourgeoisie took pains to dig into the past and came out with a considerable historical and cultural superstructure with fair amount of myth thrown in, to be used as the means of unifying people around itself. Obviously, such national awaking of a developing nation has a strong progressive side. "The awakening of the masses from feudal slumber, their struggle against all national oppression, for the sovereignty of the people, for the sovereignty of nations is progressive." It mobilizes the protest against imperialism. Migettuwatte Gunananda, Arumuga Navalar, Siddi Lebbe were all anti-imperialist national democrats of a sort. At that stage there was no serious conflict among these nationalisms, which challenged the common enemy: the British imperialism. Here the masses found at the beginning, a new leadership which carried on a dialogue and educated them as no elite had done in the past.

Both Sinhala Buddhist and Hindu Tamil unifications took place with the rise of the national bourgeoisie. It was this class that hammered and forged the masses, particularly the peasantry, into two nations based on religion, language, history and a traditional territory. It was the failure of the compradore classes which paved way for nationalism. Compradore bourgeoisie, which spoke English and took after the British was too weak and hence, cautious and undecided in assimilating the ordinary masses into an English speaking nation looking towards the West for culture. In any case it was a formidable task to eradicate feudalism and backwardness; and imperialism to which compradore classes were directly connected was not a progressive system. Still, the early idea of a Ceylonese nation was based on this class. From Dr. Christopher Elliot to Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, all pre first world war urbane upper-class national leaders since 1848, stood for a nation led by the compradore bourgeoisie. They expected a development somewhat similar to that of Australia or Canada, where there was no fundamental conflict with the British Imperialism. In fact in Ceylon at that



time the relative weight of this class was much higher than that of India. Hence the British were eager to transfer more powers to them.

But they were too frightened. In particular, they were scared of the lower class or their own making : The urban proletariat. Urban proletariat was truly cosmopolitan in outlook and all their early leaders came from highly westernized middle classes and in fact many of them were Christians. Rise of proletarian activity frightened the compradore bourgeoisie and made them lean more on the rural middle class. With imperialist backing, they suddenly took much interest in the vernacular education, allowed the Buddhist and Hindu religious leaders to get organized and to debate with the Christians, and started research on national history. Most of the class conscious urban workers were Catholics from the suburbs of Colombo. No doubt compradore bourgeoisie thought it is expedient to let them get a bashing from the Buddhist zealots. In late 19th century they managed by this manoeuvre to frighten the city proletarians, but it opened the way for the rising national bourgeoisie. With the expansion of capitalism the emergence of nationalism based on local languages and traditions was inevitable.

If the English speaking compradore Bourgeoisie failed to unify the country, then the attempt of the national bourgeoisie was disastrous. Sinhala national bourgeoisie from the very beginning had in mind only a Sinhala state. At that stage, that is in early 20's, with Tamil Nationalism at its incipient stage, Tamil bourgeoisie never thought in terms of a Tamil state. They were quite satisfied with an "independent" united country if the unification was to be primarily on the basis of English and western culture with both nationalisms playing only a secondary role. In any case they knew, the new arrangement was to be worked out in proper consultation with imperialism. However, D. S. Senanayake and other bourgeoisie leaders knew that the Sinhala nationalism was the only basis on which they can compete with the proletarian movement led by the Lanka



Sama Samaja Party and other radicals, and be at the helm of the national movement. G. G. Ponnambalam and other Tamil leaders were conscious more of what is good for their class than of the general welfare of the Tamil masses. Hence they went along with D. S. and others till it became simply unbearable. If Sinhala chauvanism was only a trick to be played whenever necessary against the proletariat, in particular in the bid for national leadership, then of course they could go along. But if it is going to be the very basis of the new nation then they would not see the meaning of it.

### **9. Unification of India.**

However Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie under neither the UNP nor the SLFP was following even its own logic to the end. If it is so, then they should have followed a policy of conversion, assimilation and integration, there should have been incentives for conversion and total acceptance of the converted. For example, it would have been easy for them, with necessary material incentives, to provide Sinhala education to Kandyan Tamils and probably even convert them to Buddhism. Help, positions, land and security in Sinhala areas would have dispersed even the Northern and Eastern Tamils. However they were not interested in that; they were more interested in division. Discrimination and oppression than in integration. Their whole ideology, though claimed to be Theravada Buddhism was filled with myth, chauvanism and petty minded rubbish. This was not an accident. It was the nature of a weak bourgeoisie class without a sound financial or industrial base, and it was a contrast to the Indian Hindu bourgeoisie. Relatively more developed Hindu industrial bourgeoisie was better equipped to put forward an ideology for unification of India. On the other hand, Hinduism with wide spectrum of tendencies within, could easily accomodate even Protestantism and hence provide an ideology for industrial capitalism. Where as strict Theravada Buddhism, though could promote an ever accomodating, egalitarian, statist bureaucracy, it can never be the ideology of an enterprising disciplined manufacturing class.



Thus inspite of the bloody division of the country, India bourgeoisie was able to achieve some degree of unity within what remained to be India, and on that basis a significant industrial development. This has influenced the Sri Lankan Tamils and obviously they are today willing to follow the Indian bourgeoisie avoiding altogether the Sinhala bourgeoisie. But in the present world capitalist crisis even the Indian bourgeoisie is a spent force. They have not completely solved any of the national democratic problems of the Indian society and now these are coming to the surface with greater thrust than ever before. With the present fermentation, before long the Indian society too will burst out like a Pandora's Box.

In the entire Indian sub continent, neither the compradore nor the national capitalist classes could develop the essential factor for assimilation of different nationalities a motivated homogeneous intelligensia ready to serve them. Such an instrument necessary for all kinds of inter course between nationalities within India, can emerge only within a full democratic unity and unrestricted economic development. That did not happen in India. English educated intelligensia of the early period was prepared to consider Britain as its mother country and respect British imperialism. However the British imperialist bourgeoisie was not prepared to take them seriously. Imperialists were interested in subjugation and not in democratic assimilation. This made them disillusioned and frustrated. In Sri Lanka, they naturally expected to be treated in the same way as their counterparts from other parts of the empire ie. Australia Canada, etc. They were badly dissapointed and every time, the system went into crisis, intelligensia was split with divided loyalty; a section even looking towards the working class. Sinhala bourgeoisie, on the other hand failed miserably in producing anything that could be called a motivated enlightened intelligensia. What it did collect was pseudo nationalist intelligensia which while secretly drawing inspiration from western thinking, demagoguecally denounced

"western imperialist culture." They only managed successfully, to bring total confusion among the educated youth of recent generations.

There can be no doubt that it is the proletarian movement that will really integrate the people of the Indian subcontinent. Even in a backward country, the modern proletariat is the only social layer capable of separating themselves from chauvanism and religious sectarianism. Capitalist mode of production is collective and universal inspite of the narrow outlook of the national bourgeoisie. Same machinery with similar specifications are used everywhere. Goods are produced with the world market in view. This necessitated an educated working class with a universal outlook. Workers movement naturally grows beyond national and sectarian barriers. Thus, it is the working class movement that is capable of creating conditions for drawing together and sustaining an enlightened intelligensia capable of moving beyond the present day philistine thinking and to arrive at a unification. There is no doubt the proletantail will create such conditions, based on right of secession and autonomy for all people in the subcontinent.



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# TRIBE, NATION AND ASSIMILATION OF NATIONS

*In this booklet Vickremabahu attempts to present an historical, hence a dialectical analysis of the formation of nations. In particular, the historical growth of Sinhala and Tamil nationalities in Sri Lanka is discussed from a Marxist point of view.*

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