

# The Cosmopolitan Roots of Nationalism

Dhanuka Bandara

*Department of Linguistics and English, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka*

dhanukabndr@gmail.com

## Introduction

This paper is part of a broader, book-length project, and presents only the preliminary analysis and findings. Nationalism remains a much-contested term/ideology in the contemporary academia. Generally, post-colonial scholarship, following the lead of early critics of nationalism like Frantz Fanon (“The Pitfalls of National Consciousness”), is strongly critical of nationalism, and it often conflates nationalism with ethno-nationalism or communalism. There is, on the other hand, the right-wing nationalists who solely understand nationalism as a communalist project that is based on racial and linguistic homogeneity. On the other, there is the post-colonial “left-liberal” critique of nationalism that portrays it as essentially communalist. Despite the fact that even strong critics of nationalism such as Frantz Fanon and Partha Chatterjee occasionally show sympathy for a more inclusive strain of nationalism, broader post-colonial critique of nationalism often accepts the communalist appropriation of nationalism as what nationalism is. I find these two discourses mutually constitutive.

Therefore, the objective of my study is to formulate a counter-discourse to both these approaches by uncovering what I understand as the “cosmopolitan roots” of nationalism. I argue that early Sri Lankan nationalism was “cosmopolitan” rather than communalist; that it envisioned a cosmopolitan nation rather than a racially and linguistically homogeneous one. This I understand as necessarily a “utopian” project. Utopianism in early Sri Lankan nationalism is one of my key research interests. However, unfortunately, this “cosmopolitan” and “utopian” discourse then took on a tangibly communalist turn following the independence in 1948. In my study I will be looking at key figures such as Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, and Ananda Coomaraswamy. The study will also focus on S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who, despite his cosmopolitan outlook, epitomizes the communalist turn of nationalism. Martin Wickremasinghe is another figure in the tradition that I am tracing. However, the present paper only looks at the Ponnambalam brothers, Coomaraswamy and Bandaranaike. It must also be noted here that while early Sri Lankan nationalism, which I interpret as “cosmopolitan,” was essentially an elite

project, there is a simultaneous development of a left-wing “internationalist” brand of nationalism under the aegis of, especially, the Lanka Samasamaja Party. This latter aspect remains outside the scope of the present paper, but part of the broader study.

## Literature Review

Harshana Rambukwelle’s *Poetics and Politics and Authenticity* (2018) critiques the idea of “authenticity” as it appears in the discourse of Sri Lankan (read Sinhala-Buddhist) nationalism. This, by now, important work looks at several key figures in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism: Anagarika Dharmapala, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and Gunadasa Amarasekara. One of the key limitations of this study is that it establishes a misleading genealogy, as Rambukwelle’s focus is limited to the aforementioned figures. My own study will challenge and complicate Rambukwelle’s claims in many ways. Rambukwelle is amongst the many post-colonial scholars who have taken tangibly harsh critical approach to nationalism. Partha Chatterjee is one of the leading critics of nationalism in post colonial scholarship. His work *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986) is an incisive reading of the emergence of nationalism in the colonial world, and particularly in India. Despite being a critic of nationalism, Chatterjee in this work seems sympathetic to M.K. Gandhi and his vision. He focuses on the Gandhian concept of “swaraj” and its radical potential. This concept, and Chatterjee’s critique of it, is relevant to my study.

Often the liberal critical dismissal of nationalism fails to account for the historical nuances. Therefore, the present study is strongly committed to historicizing the emergence and the evolution of Sri Lankan nationalism. One of Sri Lanka’s most leading historians, K.M. De Silva’s work on Ponnambalam Arunachalam is crucially important to historicizing my own work. His works, including *Sir Ponnambalan Ramanathan* (1988) and *A History of Sri Lanka* (2005) are important sources that can help understand nationalism as emerging from a particular historical context. However, I am aware of the right-wing bias in De Silva’s thinking. Therefore, his work is to be approached with caution. James Manor’s famed biography of Bandaranaike, *The Expedient Utopian* (1989) is both a biography of Bandaranaike and a historical record of the emergence and evolution of Sri Lankan nationalism. The title of the book perfectly captures the contradictions in Bandaranaike’s thinking. Utopianism is one of the key research interests in my study. Bandaranaike was a utopian, albeit he was an “expedient” one tragically for the “nation” that he led. Despite his cosmopolitan background and outlook, he made many concessions to communalism. This history is well captured in Manor’s biography of Bandaranaike.

Anupama Mohan’s *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literature* (2012) has a particular focus on the function of “village” as a concept in South Asian literature.

“Village” is a central idea in “Sinhala-Buddhist” Nationalism as it considers the village—linguistically and racially homogeneous—as a model for the nation. Mohan’s study understands the concept of nation as laying emphasis on “self-sufficiency” and looks at the Gandhian concept of “Hindu-Swaraj” and acknowledges its radical potential. My own argument has close affinities with that of Mohan.

## Methodology

This is largely going to be a text-based study. The Jaffna University library and the Jaffna Public Library are two great sources, as I intend to do significant archival research. I am based in Jaffna, which is in many ways the ideal place for this study, given its close connections with Sri Lankan nationalism, and the Jaffna University looks up to Ponnambalam Ramanathan as its founder. I also intend to conduct interviews, if possible, with descendants of especially Coomaraswamy and Ponnambalam family, if I can get access to them, and local historians who are based in Jaffna (the interviews will be part of the broader research for the project and not for the present paper).

## Conclusion

While it is ill-mannered to draw conclusions before completing research-work, this study aims to historicize the emergence of Sri Lankan nationalism to understand it necessarily as a cosmopolitan discourse at the roots. This reading of nationalism, I hope to present as an alternative to the two predominant interpretations of nationalism in the contemporary discourse: the communalist appropriation of nationalism and the post-colonial rejection of nationalism on that basis. There is at present a reemergence of nationalism, especially in the West. While this reemergence is often portrayed as “right-wing” and “populist” it is also a reaction against neoliberalism. Therefore, I believe it is time to revisit the concept of nationalism and uncover its liberatory potential. As Sri Lanka is facing increasingly more complex challenges attempting to survive the neoliberal world-order and geopolitical rivalries, casually dismissing nationalism as “racist” is reductionist and ill-advised, if not outright foolish. Hence the need for us to have more nuanced understanding of this nebulous and ever so elusive idea(1).

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