

REGIONALISM IN SRI LANKA: AN ANALYSIS OF "PROVINCIALITY" IN NEWSPAPERS

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Region is one of the foundational concepts in Geography. Regionalism or the sense of region among the inhabitants of a region is both a cause for and a manifestation of how strong a region is in the socio-cultural and political spheres. A strong sense of region in the cultural sphere can enhance the region in economic and political spheres. If regionalism is to be effective and successful, the sense of region must organically integrate cultural with the social, economic, administrative and political spheres.

The Provinces were introduced to Sri Lanka by the British in the late 19th century as administrative regions based on convenience of accessibility. Under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, Provinces were made into political regions. While Provinces exist as separate regions in political and administrative spheres, they do not seem to have evoked an equally powerful organic sense of regional identity among the people. These artificially created functional provinces were not successful in creating any sense of region among the people who lived in these provinces.

The present research - an investigation into the degree of representation of provinciality in the print media - is done to ascertain the prevalence of a sense of region in the society at large. Our basic assumption is that the sense of provinciality is reflected in and manifested by the use of the concept of province in the society, and newspapers provide verifiable evidence to test it.

The content analysis of the Sinhala and English newspapers reveals the following. First, national level reporting is overwhelmingly prominent to the almost total absence of provincial level reporting, revealing that national level identity and consciousness is more dominant than Provincial identity. Second, names of Provinces are rarely used in the newspapers, disclosing that Provinces do not still play a meaningful role in the spatial conceptualization of the people. News reporting is largely based on the cities and towns and not Provinces. Third, regions (e. g districts, cities) other than the Provinces are used frequently in the new reporting revealing the fact that other spatial units still play a significant role in the geographical imagination of the people. Fourth, Provinces are not identified as a region but as a political institution suggesting that "Province" is still an artificial category in the socio-economic field. Province is yet to become a part of the everyday life of the people. Finally, Northern and Eastern Provinces appear more frequently, confirming the significance they have achieved as separate spatial units in the context of the ethnonationalist crisis in Sri Lanka.

The study clearly reveals that people do not organically identify themselves with the Provinces. Although Provinces are a constitutional, political and an administrative fact, it is yet to become a social fact affecting the decision making and behavior of the people. The concept of province still remains socially alien to the people even after almost two decades of its existence as a separate politico-regional unit in Sri Lanka.