

INVENTING THE TAMIL NATIONHOOD: THE USE OF MAPS

SHANTHA K. HENNA YAKE AND CHITRANGANI RATHNAYAKE

Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

Nationalism is defined as the practical politics of making or maintaining a nation. A nation is a group of people who share a common past, present, and a future. A nation emerges when an ethnic group (culture) demands control or autonomy (politics) over a distinctive territory (space). A distinctive territory often termed as homeland, fatherland and motherland is an essential and intrinsic element of a nation.

Most nations grow around a traditional homeland, which is often the cultural hearth of the group concerned. The people of such a nation have developed a symbiotic relationship with their territory and it is integrated into their social, cultural and political worldview. Such association is necessary for the survival as well as smooth functioning of the nation.

When nationalist movements attempt to invent a nation where none existed earlier, the nationalist leaders manipulate history, culture, symbols, ideology and space. One of the finest examples of inventing a nation is the attempt made by the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists from legitimate political parties to terrorist organizations. Ethnicizing history to legitimize the Tamil nation is well established and documented but how geography has been ethnicized has not been adequately explored. However, the use of the "map" or rather manipulation of the map to legitimize Tamil nation hood is hardly discussed in the literature of nationalist politics in Sri Lanka.

The present research, primarily based on secondary sources, is an attempt to assess the nature and the degree of the use of the map to legitimize the Tamil nation. Our study surveyed the maps published by the Tamil nationalists in print form and in the cyber space. The preliminary findings of the research reveal (a) The map of the combined area of Northern and Eastern Provinces is used as the territory of the Tamil nation and circulated widely, (b) The map is used often and repeatedly in all nationalist communications, (c) The map and its physical models are used as deliberate and subtle instruments of manipulation, (d) The maps that challenge the Tamil nationalist version are discouraged and discarded, and (e) The map of the Tamil nation is elevated to a level of sanctity.

Tamil nationalists have very successfully used the map to manipulate the Tamil mind to accept it as a historical reality. A generation of young Tamils is growing with a mental map of Eelam as their homeland. This map is not simply an innocent cartographic depiction of what is already there but a manipulative tool to achieve desired political objectives.