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ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SRI LANKA

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The Peopling of Sri Lanka: the National Question and Some Problems of History and Ethnicity.

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Questions of history and 'ethnicity' have played, almost universally, an important role in the formation of modern nations. They continue to occupy a prominent place in contemporary politics the world over and constitute, in many situations, an integral aspect of the 'national question'. Although the basis of the relationships between ethnic groups lies outside the realm of ideas, concepts of ethnic identity, territoriality, historical origin, 'racial' distinctiveness, biological and cultural exclusiveness or superiority, form part of the ideological and psychological matrix that nurtures inter-ethnic conflict and contradiction; and from which arises that specifically modern phenomenon, *racism* or, in its less aggressive form, *ethnic chauvinism* (often subsumed under two terms, 'communalism' in South Asia and 'tribalism' in Africa).

The 20th century experience in this regard is most instructive. It shows that the evolution of various modern political and social systems - and especially those of an extremely rightist or fascist type - often draws great sustenance from racist ideas. It is also clear that the momentum generated by those ideas is not easily solved by even the most advanced and progressive forms of political, social and cultural development. Thus, at one end of the spectrum, societies such as South Africa and Israel continue to have structured racism as an integral part of their social, economic and political base, while at the other end of the spectrum, societies which have undergone various forms and degrees of socialist transformation such as the Soviet Union or China, still continue to have problems raised by inter-ethnic conflicts and contradictions.