

OUR CONNECTED WORLD

The forces of globalisation have shaped our island into becoming a 'glocalising nation', asserts **Dr. Patrick Mendis**.

Sri Lanka has never been an island. Long before the European colonial powers arrived, its rulers enjoyed diplomatic and commercial relations with the courts of the Roman Emperor Claudius, Indian Emperor Asoka and other civilised nations of many eras. And the island continues to ride the current waves of a rapidly undulating globalisation process.

So, how has the impact of centuries-old globalisation affected the lives of the islanders? Is it really globalisation or 'glocalisation' – a modified process that is a local response to global forces?

When the first English novel – *The Life And Strange Surprising Adventures Of Robinson Crusoe* – was published in 1719, there formed a perception that every island is, indeed, an 'island of Robinson Crusoe'. In a detailed description of his experiences, the Scottish sailor Robert Knox described the lives of the inhabitants of then Ceylon in his important book, *An Historical Relation Of The Island Ceylon* (1681). He and his fellow sailors, who lived in the Kingdom of Kandy for 20 years, married and intermarried with the natives.

With these globalising processes at work, the character and identity of the island have not fundamentally changed. Buddhism remains the major religion, while other faiths find the freedom for salvation through their chosen God or gods. Sinhala is the primary language, while English and Tamil are also spoken. Together with Sinhalese, other ethnic groups – for the most part – have learned to live together. The islanders still continue to expand their global networks throughout the diaspora and serve their adopted countries.

Global forces have worked in other ways as well. When the American Buddhist Col. Henry Steele Olcott arrived in Ceylon, in 1880, to propagate Buddhism and contribute to the Sinhalese-Buddhist revival, his champions and collaborators were the Ven. Hikkaduwe Sumangala and Anagarika Dharmapala. During the inaugural meeting of the Theosophical Society in Madras (Chennai), Olcott said, in 1898: "Buddhism will make every man, woman and child among you free of all the oppression of caste; free to work ... free to follow out the religious path traced by the Lord Buddha, without any priest having the right to block your way; free to become teachers and models of character to mankind."

So, Sri Lanka has never been an island and never will be – rather, it is a 'glocalising nation'. Following on from the island's historical evolution as depicted in the Mahavamsa, the islanders have retained its national identity and enriched it with global footprints. It is with such freedom that the process of glocalisation transforms a nation and even the world.

Glocalisation is not a fearful force. Following independence, the islanders have experienced the value of the evolutionary process. As long as the human desire for natural selection in greatness continues, the process of glocalisation is unyielding. It is a force that is motivated by a universal spirit and human aspirations. Relevant words of wisdom from Mahatma Gandhi: "I do not want to stay in a house with all its windows and doors shut.

I want a house with all its windows and doors open, where the cultural breezes of all lands and nations blow through my house. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Unlike Sri Lanka's evolution as a glocalising nation, though, the US is already a glocal nation by design.

After the birth of the new nation in 1776, the expelled British colonists arrived in Ceylon, in 1796, to unify and rule the island that had been governed by sundry local kingdoms for more than 2,000 years. Unlike American revolutionary war heroes, the patriotic leaders of Sri Lanka – such as Weera Puran Appu, Gongalegoda Banda and Kudapola Thera – were killed by the British around 1848.

A century later, when freedom was gifted to the island following the independence of 1948, the forced globalisation driven by commercial interests for the benefit of the British gradually ended. Buddhism emerged as the primary religion and a wide range of national characters with other religious, lingual and ethnic inputs seemingly sustained the common threads of multiple social fabrics and identities – a glocalising nation.

Now, like the US, the island desires unity with freedom in diversity. It may seem paradoxical, but freedom miraculously unites the human spirit and individual aspirations. It has been evident in the island's over-2,000-year history as well as in the 'American Experiment' of over 200 years. The late President John F. Kennedy said: "We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people."

Today, US presidential contender Barack Obama is an archetypal symbol of glocalisation. The Democratic Senator with a Kenyan father, a Kansan mother and an Indonesian stepfather had his childhood in Hawaii, was exposed to Muslim thought and educated at Harvard and worked in Chicago's poor neighbourhoods.

So, the islanders of Sri Lanka need not fear of being glocalised – because there are no islands... we are all connected and glocalised.

