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Sri Lanka



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SRI LANKA : ISLAND WITH A FUTURE HOW OUTSIDERS SEE IT

PREAMBLE

For various reasons Sri Lanka has been in recent times in the focus of many in the West. There was tourism, no doubt, selling the island as a paradise to Westerners always in search of it, since they believe that it is lost in their own part of the world. But there is much more and lasting. Sri Lanka has its tea, which is its brown woman's and man's burden, but also its tag. Beyond that tea, many in the West have discovered the changes that tea brought to the island, for better and for worse. They realise that a mono-culture like tea keeps its population in its fetters, but is also a bridge between people, if drunk and well paid for. And behind the tea have been the people bound to it and producing it, who first drew attention. From them the perspective of many observers widened and now englobes the whole island and its people. Buddhism—strange companion to tea—was the other point of attraction for many who focussed on Sri Lanka. Not only because its imprint on the nation is such that one cannot but see it. The special form of Buddhism kept alive in the island fitted in well with many Westerners searching for meaning in life—not only those who had not found it in Christianity but also ardent and knowledgeable Christians. Sinhalese Buddhism also sends out missionaries to many parts of the west, and produces a stream of books and booklets to support this mission. Many come here to learn meditation and the Buddhist way of life; some enter monasteries.

The Middle East, aim of tens of thousands of temporary workers, educated and uneducated, has its long standing links with Sri Lanka, where a strong Muslim minority makes its impact almost unobtrusively. Modernization of Sri Lanka reaches the villages and the city suburbs and slums fastest and most profoundly through these migrant labourers who come to handle cash and what cash can buy in the most rapidly developing part of the world, where affluence is to people what sand is to the desert. Links will remain, economically and socially, also culturally. The exodus of Sri Lankans, uneducated and educated, from the island to the West, on the contrary, is an irreversible one. Most of them settle there, which does not mean they are lost to the island. They would not be Lankans if they did not keep up ties with the island and spread its fame and culture.

Finally the relatively small island is a sanctuary, museum, human zoo of a kind, with so many races, languages, cultures,

religions living side by side and interweaving. There is no other country in the world of that composite nature. No wonder that it does not stop drawing the attention of people with a wide scale of interests, who have all "contributed" in some manner to this expose. The data, insights, ideas were contributed by sympathisers in the West, all of them knowledgeable about Sri Lanka, out of personal experience. These bits and pieces of knowledge would have remained perhaps shelved in brains and papers, if the present conflict had not shot Sri Lanka into the floodlight of the media. This new focus revealed unmercifully the gaps existing in the presentation of the case.

It was as if the floodlight overlit some features and left others in the dark. It dawned on many with knowledge and experience that a complete picture of Sri Lanka had never been drawn. It had all been haphazard, incidental, biased. Now their visits to Sri Lanka received a new purpose. They wanted to see clearly themselves, and also be able to answer questions at home. This booklet, therefore, is what has been pooled from this laborious endeavour.

Due to its origin, it is meant to inform Westerners and also those who have little or no knowledge about Sri Lanka, about the island and its people, in which undertaking the 'ethnic' conflict is no more than the occasion at which this effort was made. It is neither the focus or the pivot of the book, convinced as the 'authors' are that only seen in the total context, and however odd it may sound, as a side issue, can any solution be envisaged. The public they address themselves to is their own Western world. It gives them the liberty to retain a certain amount of naivete, at the same time mastering all their pedagogical skills to enlighten a public who are, if at all, fed with half-truths and myths about Sri Lanka. As such it is an exercise in inter-cultural education. It is open to critique; asks for it. But no critique can be received if no word is printed. The authors do not beg forgiveness for their misconceptions, biases or prejudices. They expose them in these pages. What better can one do among friends and well-wishers?

CHAPTER 1

LANKAN IDENTITY

What is it that makes Sri Lankan's stand out in a crowd of Asians, makes them memorable when being visited in their homes, abroad or in their own country, what gives this typical Lankan touch and imprint?

Obviously there is no Lankan perfectly fitting in this frame. The same as there are no stereotype Americans, Germans or British. The person whom one meets is usually the exception. Yet, there is something like Britishness, Germanic behaviour, American way of life. So there is a Lankan identity. Let us try picturing it, even if it turns out to be a caricature. Also caricatures strike a cord and ring a bell.

VERSATILE YET STEADY

There is unanimity among people moving with Sri Lankans or visiting them, that they are not only exceptionally hospitable but also out-going and in-taking. Picture-taking in Sri Lanka is great fun—except where tourism has turned it into a trade, and even there the fun does not wear off. Waving along the road to speeding visitors is a favoured pastime. While language is a barrier, smiles and the initially misleading shaking of the head which does not indicate 'no' but 'yes' express this unusual openness.

In agricultural society learned folk will tell you, hospitality is one of the skills of survival. Granted—but it does not explain the difference in hospitality with or without a smile, with or without openness. One can be most hospitable and keep guests absolutely at bay. In Sri Lanka, and in Sri Lankans abroad—it is this openness, more than the hospitality, which one remembers.

In Sri Lanka and in Sri Lankans there is an ingenuity of a striking sort. If one tries to find comparative qualities in Europe, one could see the Irish or the Welsh as Lankans, in comparison to the English; the Latins as the Lankans in comparison to the Teutonics and Anglo-Saxons; the Dutch as the Lankans in comparison to the Germans.

Versatility is the word. It turns Lankans into excellent mechanics making old-timers run without adequate tools or spare-parts, into UN diplomats, teachers in Africa, maids in Italy, Buddhist missionaries in the West.

Versatility has, naturally, also its weak spots. It is not a virtue in itself. Lankans are notorious in the drug trade between Asia and Europe; they make excellent touts; beware of pickpockets in Sri Lanka!

Versatility is not the same as volatility, however. Tourists only moving with touts, Europeans only in touch with young desperados abroad, might mistake the easy way Lankans make contacts and can be contacted for volatility, only worth suspicion. Versatility needs pivot, otherwise it blows with the wind.

People in Sri Lanka have the solid grounding of tradition. The island is a mosaic of races, languages and creeds, easily called potpourri by hasty visitors. Serious observers and real students however, tend to single out, one of the other features, e.g. the peace which Buddhism offers, as the explanation of this solidity which is versatility's twin. You cannot sweep a Lankan easily off her or his feet, even if they politely smile at your statements and do not offer frontal opposition. If you have the time to come back and listen more than talk, you get your retort.

This solidity has a different foundation in a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu, in villagers and in townspeople.

It is different from the ponderousness found in representatives of great nations, the fussiness of small ones. Clad in a loose gown of humour, the garb could be misunderstood to disguise hollowness. True versatility, however, is a sign of depth. How easy it is to converse seriously with a Lankan whom one came to talk with in an easy conversation.

There is also a quality of inner relaxation, generally ascribed to the influence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It is a quality which marks Asians in general, surely when compared to Westerners of the modern kind.

The same versatility makes Sri Lankans prone to emotional reactions, also of the violent kind. This side of the coin has been largely understated or underestimated in reports abroad. Community life in Sri Lanka is full of silent or open vendettas, violent flare-ups, single and group amok. Are these the same people who burned and hacked shortly before, who could be seen smiling in the streets, shaking their heads over what they themselves had caused? Could such nice, polite, gentle people throw petrol bombs and brandish swords, killing women and children? Only those who have no knowledge of daily life in Sri Lanka, nor of its history, could have dreamed up the non-violent society one expects after reading the propaganda that politicians, religious enthusiasts or travel guides turn out.

Sri Lankans know the art of combining versatility with steadiness. Sometimes they are tight rope walkers, but mostly have both feet on the ground. They do not label this quality a virtue but live it without reflecting much on it. This can put Western observers off the track, not taking Lankans seriously, as they themselves think that only people who look serious are serious people. Come to Sri Lanka and see the opposite.

HINGE BETWEEN OCEANS

The quick glance needed to see that Sri Lanka is situated about half-way between the Eastern and the Western part of South Asia and between the Far West and the Far East, is seldom thrown, judging from the lack of awareness of this position among observers and insiders.

Is it because Sri Lanka is too small an island? Many mistake it for a minute part of India. Others overlook it. On world maps the tiny island often is hardly visible.

World traffic on the Southern oceans always has been touching the island. Till the popularisation of the compass and the manufacture of bigger and faster ships, mainly by the Arabs from the 10th century on, ships had been hugging the coast line. Malays and Indonesians and still earlier seafarers knew all about winds and monsoons and travelled long distances by open sea. Did they populate the island first? The Veddahs, today the oldest remainder of the former population, are of the Melanesian type.

When Dravidians and Aryans invaded from India, they were latecomers. What they did to the local population is not yet explored, but one can expect that they were not better or worse than other imperialists. The Tamils came from South India, the Sinhalese from the North, both using the normal sea communication. The Sinhalese established the Kingdoms, which lasted for so long and became the majority, absorbing both the original population and part of the Tamils. Naturally, their civilisation shows Tamil influences and their dynasties drew half blood from Tamil princesses.

Mantota (Mantai), north of Mannar, was the Rotterdam of the East from times immemorial, its ruins are now being excavated. The interest in Sri Lanka itself for its own maritime past is still amazingly small. Roman and Greek ships brought goods that were bartered with Chinese and Indonesian mariners, the Island itself supplying elephants and peacocks, gems and spices, against goods from all over the world.

When the founding fathers of the Sinhala nation landed, there were already giant and small tanks (reservoirs) in existence and most probably rice fields as well.

Eastern and Western connections remained as important for the ages to come, the extent and splendour of the island attracting invading fleets from the whole area, especially from the South of India, the present States of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Sinhalese kings shipped their armies over there and some had mighty fleets.

The silting of Mantai and the street between India and Lanka, but much more the taking over of South Asian sea transit traffic by the Arabs, shifted trade towards the South-West of the island—the reason why the oldest and largest Arabic Muslim settlements are there. Colombo exists thanks to them. Some say that the Sinhalese kings also shifted their capitals gradually towards the South-West because of the alluring trade going on there.

No wonder that the Portuguese, for the first time in 1505, anchored at Colombo for their trade designs. They were in search of spices, not in the first place of Lankan cinnamon though nutmeg and cloves much higher in price, were their main aim and these had to be fetched in Indonesia. 'Ceilao' was their station before reaching Malacca and Ambonia. The harbour was Galle in the extreme South-West of the island.

The ancient Sinhalese kingdoms in the present North Central Province had been long abandoned and left to the jungle. The Tamil Kingdom of Jaffna was soon added by the Portuguese, who only occupied the coast lines, to their possessions. Colombo became the main fortified trading station. The Sinhalese, who had tried to drive them away with the help of the competing Dutch, but never received Colombo once captured back from them, retreated to the kingdom of Kandy, comprising the central hills and mountains and the Southern rice granary of Ruhuna.

Now 'Zeylan', as the Dutch called it, from being trading post open to international traffic, was degraded to a station of the V.O.C., a private Dutch company, that had captured Asian maritime inter-trade from the Arabs.

The English, who took over from the Dutch at the end of the 18th century, also occupied the Kandyan Kingdom (1815). The island was then fitted into their new industrial empire; plantations were introduced as an industry, manufacturing the raw materials the 'motherland' wanted. After more than three centuries of independence, marked by an astonishing blossoming of the Arts and of Buddhism, notwithstanding the stagnation resulting from permanent warfare and a feudal way of life, the interior of the island was laid open. Modernisation took place at an amazing pace.

Being a small island, Sri Lanka took all alien influences, not only those from India, deep into its interior. A very mixed population, nevertheless neatly organised by language, culture and religion, participated in changing world culture, as a whole, at a rate which has hardly been seen elsewhere. Many were the vehicles carrying those influences; trade, religion, politics, colonisation, oral tradition, literature and now the mass media. The versatility which is so characteristic of the population of the island, has grown from the steady absorption of this wide variety of elements and systems.

Doubtlessly, the four organised world religions which are now indigenous to Sri Lanka: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, have been the factors forging distinct characteristics of the cultural entities making up the population's solid though multifarious identity. More than language or race they shaped up the island's culture. Buddhism and Christianity, universal by nature and history, wove textures embracing people of different ethnic descent. Less visibly but very vitally the fifth great religion in Sri Lanka, that of the ghosts and the gods, keeps the whole population profoundly united.

MOSAIC OF PEOPLE

A mosaic is 'the fitting together in a design of small pieces of coloured marble, glass etc and anything of similar appearance or composed by the piecing together of different things' (Chambers). The population of Sri Lanka is such a mosaic. The difference of course is, that there the composition is not made of dead things but of live people, versatile people at that. What looks a static mosaic today, can turn into chaos tomorrow.

The different large ethnic groups, show the full beauty of this composition. As a mosaic, there is a clear pattern, there is distinction between the components and there are the different shades within the major components without which the composition would be crude and boring. Like the subtle nuances of sunset and sunrise in Sri Lanka, so is the charm of its "mosaic people". A guided tour now will lead eyes and mind over the salient features of the island's population.

Let us start with the ancient population which has been absorbed into the major groups when Sinhalese and Tamils arrived from India and settled in the country. A look at the caste system shows distinctly different faces in the so-called high and low castes. E.g. Among drummers, dancers and dhobies (washer-men) faces are often remarkably distinct from what is considered typically Aryan or Dravidian. Vestiges of an ancient population, maintained in a caste position? The remaining Veddahs, supposed to be the only remnants of the population of old, are a community of their own, yet speaking Sinhalese.

Where are, ethnically speaking, the pure Sinhalese and the pure Tamils? A few examples. On the West coast, North of Colombo, up to the Vanni, the area South-West of the Jaffna peninsular, the population is very mixed, with Tamil still spoken in pockets of areas where the population consider themselves Sinhalese. The Sinhalese Kings had their consorts brought over from India; a reason why kings and their armies came from there, invited or uninvited, to fill empty thrones to which they had claims. The aristocracy followed suit. As in Europe, where royalty in Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and England came from abroad and where dynastic wars devastated countries for centuries. Sri Lanka is a text book example of how mixed, ethnically, an ethnic group can be, without losing its cultural and religious identity.

In the area of the former Kingdom of Kandy especially in and around that town, faces of a distinctly European or Indonesian (Malay) cut can be seen today. The kings settled prisoners of war and those who crossed over to them, giving them women and land. This makes walks in Kandyan territory a visual pleasure.

In all areas where there were armed garrisons inter-marriage and intercourse were normal. Most of their progeny were absorbed into the local population, but one can easily see distinct ethnic traces. Descendants of Portuguese, Dutch and English expatriates over the centuries formed a group of their own: the Burghers. They are distinguished according to their line of descendency and hold to their names, cuisine, interior decoration, manners. Pockets of direct descendants of Portuguese, African and Indonesian auxiliary troops employed by the Portuguese and the Dutch are to be found in the island, with distinct features and remnants of dance, language and customs.

The Tamils are a much differentiated community, or better a string of communities with sometimes little or no historic relations. Jaffna Tamils are as distinct—and joked about—as the Scots in the United Kingdom. The Batticaloa Tamils of the East coast are a different lot, which shows itself ever in their very low economic situation, the lowest of the country. Colombo Tamils are a mosaic in itself; some groups arrived rather recently from India, whereas others have roots as old as Colombo as a metropolis. The 'Indian' Tamils should change that name as soon as possible, as those who have not been 'repatriated' to India (where most of them never had been, many not even in their dreams) now are Sri Lankan citizens or are awaiting to exchange their statelessness for that citizenship.

The Muslims are largely Arabic in offspring. Their mother tongue however, is Tamil, a language which they cherish and promote in their own schools. They are a very distinct, some say

closed community. A minority among them came from the East-South-Asia, from Indonesia as Dutch auxiliary troops, partly also political exiles and from Malaysia during British times. Their language is Malay.

PANTHEON

To Western visitors, with their tradition of religious strife and war, the way Religious in Sri Lanka exist side by side, even within the same premises, is a reason for amazement, bewilderment even. All five great world religions are well at home there. One has more local history than the other but none is more alien or indigenous than the other. That in itself is astonishing and is found hardly anywhere else in the world.

What is usually not recognised as a religion on its own, yet most prevailing in Sri Lanka, is what some call animism, others nature religion, others—clumsily—primitive religion. Since it is generally practised, but not overall organised outside observers often see it as a rite, custom, practice of one of the existing religions. Others, who have read more, relegate these customs to the corner of popular religion or magic and superstition. The fact that this religion of ghosts and gods as one could label it, is recognised and practised within the 'high' religions adds to the confusion among visitors and even scholars from the West.

Another easy way out while labelling religious beliefs and practices called incongruent with 'high' religions is so called some 'Hindu', Hinduism, a global name for all religions shaped in India, and as such includes Buddhism. In Sri Lanka the name has a ring of 'Indian' alien to Sri Lanka, what is unfair to the Tamils of Sri Lanka whose religion is Hinduism.

Their religion should be called Shivaism or whatever coherent religious form they adhere to. And gods of Lanka like Vishnu, Saman, Kataragama, Pattini, Natha, should not be called Hindu as if they are aliens.

In the famous Esala Perahera at Kandy five temples form the procession, one the Buddhist Temple of the Tooth is worshipped, the other four are the devales. Only one of those temples of the gods is serviced by Tamil Brahmin priests ('Hindus') but that temple is of God Kataragama, without any doubt the most popular of the gods of Sri Lanka. He has his sanctuary at Kataragama in the South-East, where the priests serving him are Sinhalese Buddhists, as all priests are in the temples of the gods of the Sinhalese. Hindu priests administer at Kataragama a temple of their own and also the Muslim have their mosque; even many Christians like praying and worshipping there.

The peak of it all is Adams Peak, in the South-West mountain massif, where people of all religions flock to the summit where a imprint is found. For the god seekers it is that of God Saman, for the Buddhists of the Buddha who visited the spot (but they also could worship god Saman's feet) for the Muslims Adam, for the Christians Adam or Saint Thomas the Apostle who died in Madras.

The majority of the Sinhalese are Buddhists. The Buddha is said to have visited Sri Lanka three times during his lifetime and preached his doctrine successfully. What happened to his early followers is not recorded, in any case were they Sinhalese? It was the monk Mahinda, son of the Buddhist Emperor Asoka, who brought Buddhism ceremoniously to the Sinhalese king of Anuradhapura, two centuries after the Buddha's missionary work and passing-away.

Looking at Buddhism, Western observers, nourished by their own (short) history of Christianity, are easily caught in their urge to draw neat borderlines—which end up in apartheid. To them Buddhism is without God as they see Him. And 'only' a philosophy as they understand it. A close look at Sinhala Buddhism shows that it does not fit these categories, but responds to Asian, in this case Sri Lankan ones.

Sri Lankan Christians do not fit in either however much their religion resembles the Western brand of Christianity. It has been a blessing in disguise, that all denominations of Western Christianity took roots in Sri Lanka and that the intolerance which Portuguese Catholics and Protestant Dutch demonstrated in the island never became indigenous.

Only those who turn the key of versatility which opens the treasure chest of Sri Lanka, can see that there is more than religious tolerance and that this is not identical with religious confusion in religious practice in Sri Lanka.

Tolerance leaves others their opinion. Confusion is oblivious of distinctions. There is an inner affinity between all religions, which is rather unknown in the West but well appreciated in Sri Lanka.

All Sri Lankans enjoy the major holidays of the four established religions, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Poya day, Full Moon Poya day, cherished by Buddhists, is for all. In the newspapers the best brains of the various religions explain with great care their most essential values and truths. This is clarification in favour of affinity.

Non-Catholics flocking to shrines of Saint Anthony or Our Lady of Perpetual Succour are not in their majority ignorant of their own religion. They recognise divine intercession and presence wherever others do, without having to trespass into alien territories. They can justify what they do from their religion's point of view and formulate this to themselves and others, but do not suffer from a permanent urge for justification.

Islam in Sri Lanka, notwithstanding Arabic influences, specially nowadays from the Middle East, has the characteristics of South-East Asian Islam, the reason why it is self-contained and yet surprisingly open.

Deeply religious people in Sri Lanka are tolerant towards other religions, not because they do not see clear, but because the more they see clear they see through. There are possibly few saints in Sri Lanka, if any, but there are many people with a profound spirituality.

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN

The absorption power which Sri Lanka's people have demonstrated over the centuries, using 'imports' for completing the "mosaic" of its culture which never will be completed, is great. People who travel to India after having visited Sri Lanka, receive often a culture shock since they expected it to be similar. Western visitors coming from India are inclined to calling Sri Lanka more Westernised and like or dislike it therefore.

India is much more industrialised than Sri Lanka, and as such is more integrated in the system which the West developed, than the tiny island of Sri Lanka that is struggling to keep a small Free Trade Zone viable. On the other hand the plantations industry has Sri Lanka more in its grip, because the island depends for more than half of its income on vulnerable exports.

Even the most forgotten village in Sri Lanka has television and video sets, largely the spoils of migrant labour in the Middle East. Trousers for men and, less rapidly for women, break the monopoly sarongs, lungis and sarees worn by the people. Government ministers think it timely to don white long national dresses (a recent invention) and look natural in it, while their children cherish jeans. In temples and mosques one enters barefoot, in Christian churches shoes are worn. Homes are filling up with furniture, so that squatting on the ground is becoming a ceremonial posture.

Given her shallow size and the mobility of her people, Sri Lankans as a whole freely use electronic gadgets of the latest model. But India has metropolitan cities, with slums extending over areas covered in Sri Lanka with tea, in comparison to which Colombo is a sleepy provincial town.

Sri Lanka has built some of the most sophisticated irrigation dams in the world and the Mahaweli Accelerated Project is as ambitious as anything anywhere else. No village is untouched by modernity since village people, largely women work in the metropolis, the Free Trade Zone, in the Middle East or in the West. It is not just gadgets they return with.

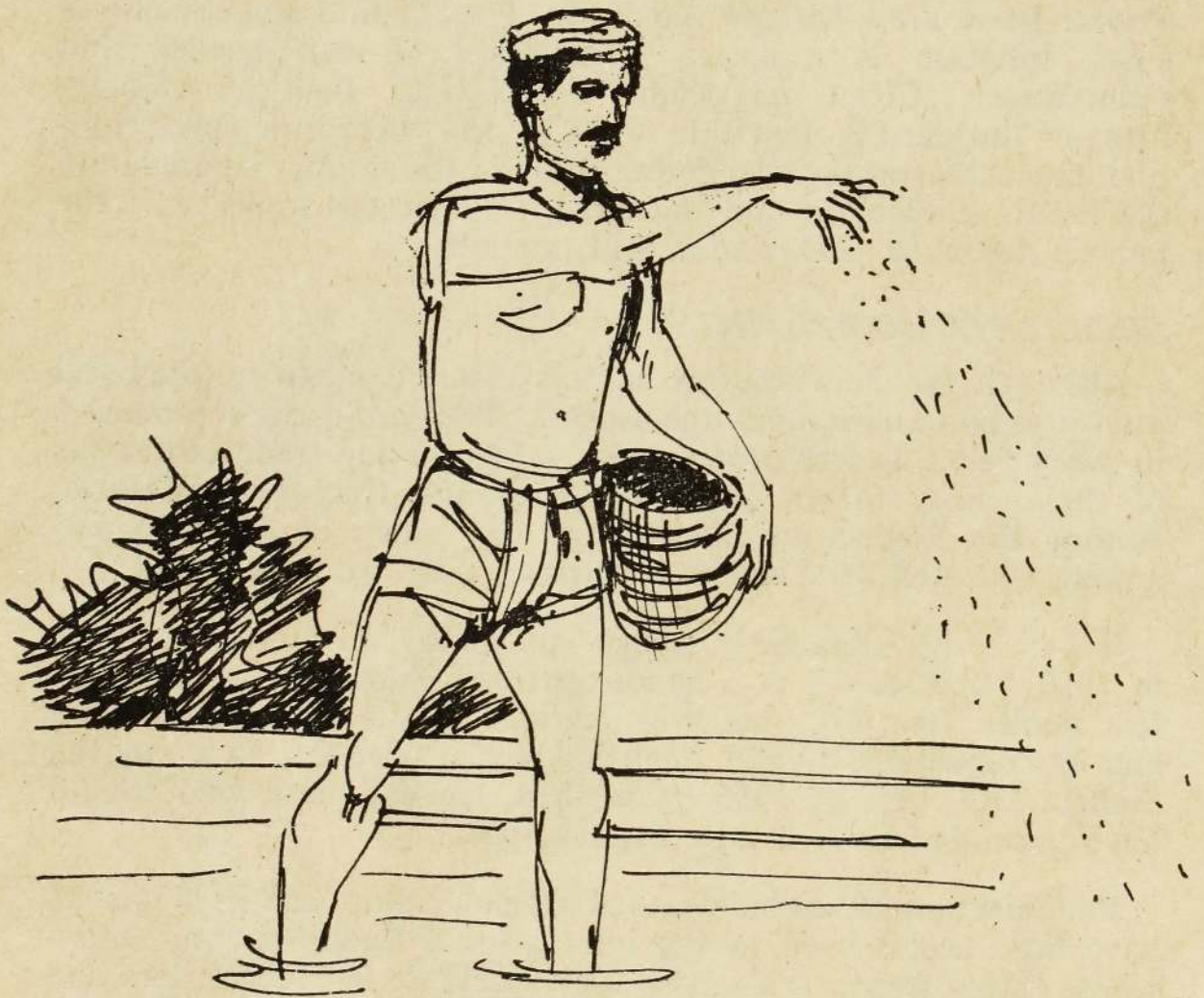
Those who still sit back to do benevolent Sri Lanka watching, pondering about the choice, the country has for its future should wake up discovering that they missed the bus. The country has departed long ago on a course, better a number of courses, which left the junction where roads divide. The junction has become a roundabout, where one returns inevitably on the various circuits followed.

From its place on the map and in world history, the island has not the choices others have in store for her. Wilfully and skilfully present day Sri Lankans try to move in world traffic at their own speed and in their own vehicle.

Sri Lanka is betting several horses at the same time. And which country does not today? The tea plantations are planned to reduce their acreage but increase the quality and quantity of tea. The private sector is encouraged to compete with the government. Large chunks of former tea land are distributed among settlers who grow food there. First one hundred thousand houses were attempted to be built; when this was achieved, the target was enlarged to one million. Free Trade Zones are expected to give employment to tens of thousands and bring in investments and, in the long run, taxes. Employment abroad, especially in the Middle East, is encouraged. Although the drain of Sri Lanka intelligentsia and skilled labour is regretted, it is hardly hindered. The expectation is that the return by way of contacts, allowances and retirement incomes, pays back for it. The Mahaweli Projects give land and water to hundreds of thousands of peasants, most of whom were landless; its food production could cause even problems on the local market unless exports absorb part of it. Modern ideas are floating freely, mass media floods the country with spectacles and ideas unheard and unseen. Religious activities are multiplying, temples and mosques and churches are in good state and full. Loudspeakers fill township, village and countryside with religious sermons and festive music. Buses, state owned and private ones, operate a network almost unique in the world. Construction work on bridges, dams, agricultural schemes, religious buildings, huge statues, markets and supermarkets, schools, bungalows and home-steads, is omnipresent.

No wonder, many say at home and abroad, that tensions simmer and boil over. They have led to what often is misunderstood as

civil war between Sinhalese and Tamils. Western onlookers should know better. They grapple in their countries (Belgium, France, England, Ireland, Spain) with minorities claiming more autonomy, sometimes independence. Those are no civil wars, and so the armed clashes in Sri Lanka are not. They are signs, more than in European countries, of rapid changes taking place, overtaking those who handle them. Also for locals it is extremely difficult to be involved in this society in upheaval but keep their head cool, contributing constructively to solutions to problems that, at times, seem too large.



CHAPTER 2

PRESENT COMPLAINTS

Any country in the world is full of complaints. Sri Lanka is no exception. Strike a conversation and you hear them in plenty. Travel by bus—if the engine does not quell conversation (that in itself is reason for much grumbling) and your ears will ache of them. Newspapers are full of plaintiff-cum articles and letters to the editor, parliament is resounding from complaints by government, opposition and backbench parliamentarians: Roads are in a horrible state. State buses (SLTB) rumble and grumble and are overloaded. Private buses are killers on the road. Prices climb and sometimes soar. Inflation is rampant. Corruption is many-headed and omnipresent. Clean politicians are scarce. Political employment of thuggery is rampant. And so on. Before however complaints touching at the very composition of the country's population are listed, since to in and outsiders it sometimes looks as if the mosaic described before soon will crumble.

SINHALESE COMPLAINTS

Although the Sinhalese are in the absolute majority, they feel minoritarian in more than one aspect. They are under-represented in many fields; in free professions, commerce and trade, top ranks of the security forces, academic fields and teaching profession. Among the English speaking (now very much in demand) and among educated Sri Lankan expatriates they are under-rated.

It is true, the Sinhalese language was made the National language in 1956, but today it is a handicap to be Sinhala-only speaking; few books, few jobs, under-estimation. Sinhalese typing is less and less requested, it is all English which is needed. In a way the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 backlashed, leaving those who should have benefitted from it now handicapped.

Buddhist monks, the stalwarts of Sinhala culture and its language, have little access even to the international Buddhist community, whose lingua franca is English; they specialise in Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit. However much they are esteemed in society in general, that does not make up for their being confined to their own constituency, which is their province and therefore parochial.

Much lip service is paid to Ayurveda and indigenous medicine, but in actual fact ayurvedic doctors come last in the hierarchy of medics, also income wise. The healthy food of old is swept away by the invasion of fast food, part of the liberal import and marketing system prevailing.

Tamils have their home territories which can be formed into homelands in a decentralised political administration, Muslims have their settlements which are closely knit, Christians have their concentrations, but the Sinhalese have been so intermingled with others in areas they consider as their own, that they have no place to claim for themselves.

The heart of the Sinhalese country which resisted colonial imposition for so long, the former Kingdom of Kandy, also today suffers from the drawbacks of that episode. The Kandyan and Ruhunu peasantry lost land and hinterland to a great extent to the plantation industry. When it is recognised that the Tamils, brought into the country as plantation labour, today or tomorrow the rightful citizens of the country—still the traditional Sinhalese peasantry belonging to the most neglected part of the population is still stifled in its pursuits by lack of land and facilities. Moreover, the cadres, and as a consequence commerce and part of the free professions in the plantation area came from the coastal areas and this handicap weighs still heavily on the local Sinhalese population.

The Sinhalese as a community are caricatured as easy going, on the lazy side, more interested in spending than in thriftiness, but actually the peasants, their wives and children are hard-working people with little energy from healthy food to go on. Why continue with belittling labels, easily misused for political purposes, instead of accepting a lifestyle which has its strong side?

The Sinhalese being the community which is mainly oriented towards agriculture, it is only natural that they opt for populating the newly laid open areas where hard labour of pioneers is required. Even if this urge is exploited for political purposes by some leaders of the Sinhalese community who they themselves never would opt for such frugal living—it should be recognised for what it is; a demographic movement away from overcrowded settlements. It should not be denounced as an imperialistic strategy. And what if Sinhalese want to re-create their own homeland somewhere in the country?

The departure of so many 'Indian' Tamils for India left many work places open in the estates. Already Sinhalese villagers are moving in to occupy those places. They prove in actual practice that their work can be hard and consistent. That they are villagers and not lines dwellers, causes different attitudes towards industrial labour. Here the Sinhalese estate labourers should not be pushed into a system which they rejected when it was introduced. Together with the Sri Lankan Tamils they should be given the chance to combine village life with estate work.

TAMIL COMPLAINTS

It is an insult to depict the Tamils as specially subservient to colonial rule, predilected mercenaries of the White Raj, or at least as the ones who exploited chances of modernisation, resulting in jobs and commercial expansion, during that period. Why are they singled out among the coastal people, composed of all races, Sinhalese, Tamil as well as Muslim? Migrants (inner immigration from the North to the West coast and later to the interior of the country), they worked extra hard and tried to move into those spaces in society where there were voids, like government service, education, free professions, universities, commerce and trade.

It is unfair, if at all a list should be made, to list the Tamils first on the list of those who made use of the new society growing up with the increasing impact of colonialism and the ensuing modernisation, first in the coastal areas and later, when the British occupied the Kandyan area and Ruhuna, in the interior. They shared those privileges with all other coastal people, e.g. Buddhists from the South.

It is unhistoric to depict the Tamils as a nation (which they never have been, they were an ever changing conglomeration like the Sinhalese) hereditarily allied with Tamil invaders of Sri Lanka. Tamils who had been indigenous to the island for perhaps as long as the Sinhalese, cannot be depicted as traitors of the Sri Lankan nation to be. It is equally unhistoric to depict the Tamils—in India and Sri Lanka—as Hindus, as against the Sinhalese as Buddhists. Many Tamils have been Buddhists. Perhaps also Elara was a Buddhist. The Sinhalese Buddhist kings always had brahmin priests at their courts (as had the Buddhist kings of the Khmer and do the Buddhist kings of the Thai) for astrology and worship.

It is imperialistic if Sinhalese consider the island as their property and all others their guests. It is also an undue burden to the Tamils to be expected to prove when and where their kingdom (s) in Sri Lanka have been, since this is a 19th century nation-state notion which originated in the West and imposed in retrospect on Sri Lankan history.

It is unrealistic to suspect 'the Tamils' to be forerunners, fifth columnists or front fighters for Tamil Nadu, a state in India, or for a World Federation of Tamils to be.

It is unreasonable to brand Tamil insurgents of today as terrorists, when the security forces, for the eyes of the whole world, perpetrate an almost unending series of terrorist acts.

It is unjust that Tamils have no real security in this country, in which security forces continuously have proven to be partial and

partisan against them; recruitment for the security forces indicates that this security is not in store for the future.

MINORITY COMPLAINTS

There is unanimity among all minorities in one respect; that the so called "ethnic conflict" goes largely at their expense. Not only ethnic minorities fear to be downtrodden by forces at work who think only in the context of a constructed clash between 'the' Sinhalese and 'the' Tamils, there are also religious ones and, even more so, minorities within the majorities (which tend to be lumped together for the purpose), who are afraid to root a large part of the bill.

The real minorities think that they are the touch-stone for judging whether a solution to the present 'ethnic' conflict is good for the nation as a whole. Unless a solution is tested in the perspective of the real minorities, the conflict will go underground, only to burst out at some other time and place again. If it is left to the main parties involved, only fake solutions will be found. For who are the parties involved? It should be the whole nation.

Ruhuna for example, is such a minority, seen in the context of the nation. It suffered most from colonialism, first as a result of the destruction of the village tanks in the Uva rebellion, resulting in de-population and disappearance of villages. Then came the tea to upper Uva, its revenue going to the metropolis and depriving lower Uva of water and national interest. There are no grandiose government plans for Ruhuna. Sure, not all can be done at the same time, but any solution to the present problem should give due attention to Ruhuna's problems.

Another minority cluster, of mixed Sinhalese-Tamil composition this time, are the tea and rubber areas. Will political solutions affect these particular minorities in the nation, Sinhalese Kandyan peasants and Tamil estate workers, positively? Or will they be forgotten in the process?

The same is true for the Eastern Province, where the resident Tamils are among the poorest of the nation, the most neglected. However, they are not the only ones, for the Muslims and the Sinhalese who form with the Tamils there, each about one third of the province's population, are not better off.

There are a number of distinct Tamil groups in the country: Jaffna, Colombo, up-country, plantation, all-island-Tamils, each with their own complaints. But it is crucial to single out the real minorities among them.

Easily abroad, 'the' Tamils are identified with the Tamils working in the plantations; their pictures are so well known from the tea propaganda (which often depicts urban beauties hauled before the camera). As a group the 'Indian' Tamils are strongly opposed to an independent Tamil state in this island and hope that any solution found will take their typical situation into account. They know that they are not wanted in Jaffna and they do not want to move there.

In Jaffna itself—where caste is reigning supreme, as nowhere else in the country—the low caste and casteless minorities from the majority in numbers but has no such position. Whatever guarantee there will be found for Tamil identity of the Jaffna type in the peninsular, the whole nation has a stake in the situation of the real minorities. Liberation of those who are kept under by the caste system cannot be but the hallmark of any liberation movement worth that name.

The real minorities, within the nation and within their own 'race', have this general complaint that is not sufficiently reckoned with when negotiations are on and the future is mapped out.

The Muslims are perhaps the best example of neglect. They have the longest, experience of all the 'ethnic' minorities with regard to group community living within the national community. They like staying together, have strong and visible links, cultivate their own languages, run proper school systems and adhere to a religion which binds them tightly together. They also have an acute awareness of the limitations of that community life which can lead to isolation and insularity and their leaders are working hard to remedy this. They are unique in the country, but not so unique that their position and experience is only of value to themselves. On the contrary, sharing their experience and drawing on their social textures could be a benefit to the whole nation. Within their community there is also the minority of the Malays. They have their own language and culture. They are also a living link with the Eastern part of South-East Asia. Their Islamic tradition is different from the Arabic/Indian of the majority Moors.

The Burghers are another minority with a potentially exemplary position in the country. They complain of having been at the mercy of the ruling groups. First the White Raj in his different attires, Portuguese, Dutch and English, where they were privileged and oppressed at the same time. From those days they inherited the position they had, when their privilege, the English language was taken out of their hands by the Sinhala Only Act. Many of them emigrated; great skills and quite a culture was lost for the country. Enough remained to welcome the re-installation of English as a national and international language. They learned enough Sinhalese and grappled sufficiently with the new situation to be of new,

better use. They do not feel recognised in that place, although a good number of them occupy key positions (not top roles). Why not tap this precious experience? Soon they will be the only minority without a distinct community, their link will be the non-formal network of family and culture structures, non-political but very real.

The Christians are the only community which is not 'ethnic'. They complain that they still are suspected by not a few, also in leading positions of not being non-national, having come late and being linked to a world religion which came to Sri Lanka in the colonial days from those 'mother countries'. They ask whether they are not yet aware of the fact that Christianity is a world, not a Western religion, with soon more coloured than white members? They do not share the bigotry endemic in the Christian conquerors who could not make the distinction between greed and creed and recognise the world religion as a brother and sisters. Actually they say, there are more Christians spreading the message of the Buddha, while maintaining their own identity, in the West than there are Buddhists doing so. They are hesitant saying so, as this might open old wounds in people who knew Christians as the arrogant type.

EVERYBODY'S COMPLAINTS

All Lankans complain that the island's name and fame are smudged, apparently beyond repair, through the violence which erupted over the last decade, but specially the last few years. They cannot travel, cannot receive letters or visitors, without being scrutinised about those happenings, so unfamiliar with the island's fame as it was before. Lankans travelling abroad cut short their trip since they could not bear it any longer.

All Lankans complain that the way the media abroad, present the situation, distorts the facts or at least lifts them out of context. The impression which remains is one of confusion; how can such gentle people with such a beautiful country turn out to be so cruel, and seemingly relish it? Lankans who returned to the country after some time abroad, expected the whole country to be in flames and fumes, as even they were under the influence of what they had seen on T.V. and read in the papers.

What gradually converges among those who give serious thoughts to this impression of unbridled violence, the complete opposite of all what Sri Lanka could be excused, as it cannot be explained away. It is not even the question of whether the astounding coverage which violence in Sri Lanka receives in the world media, is not, partly at least, a boomerang effect of the romantic package deals

presented to the world since the 'discovery' of Sri Lanka by Colonel Olcott and Western scholars. The question mark is also not how violence is possible in a country so peaceful like Sri Lanka, since no Sri Lankan ever had this idea. One only needs to listen to the complaints regarding day-to-day violence occurring in towns and villages. Statistics about homicides and suicides rate Sri Lanka among the highest in the world.

What really haunts the people of Sri Lanka, of all classes, castes and creeds but specially the small people, who bear the brunt of it is that organised violence has become **an institution in the country. It presents itself in three forms.** Most institutionalised is the custom of maltreatment of people who are questioned in connection with public disorder or crime, by the men guarding law and order. Abusive language is the least that is used to intimidate suspects and others, with a special language reserved for women. Hammering before investigation is a normal practice. "Giving the works," as moderate forms of torture are called, is one way of interrogation. Where did this practice come from? From the last king of Kandy? From the British? Nobody cares to know, but everybody is affected especially those who are defenseless and have no connections.

Sporadic is violence connected with the ideology of around revolution. The insurgency of 1971 was the first outburst. Now the idea has been put into practice by Tamil insurgents. The idea obviously comes from abroad but is not foreign-power backed; it is in the air. Both uprisings evoked violent retaliation by the security forces. This is not party bound; it has become the non-imaginative over-reaction to a poorly thought out over-reaction. And it threatens to become part of the political machinery and to stay and grow well.

Another institutionalised form of violence in Sri Lanka has become almost endemic. It is the use made for political reasons of the social institution of the thugs: crime oriented muscle men to be found in all local communities. The riots of 1983 were a supreme example of it. Since official investigation either never takes place or is never made public, the thugs and their victims feel that there is protection in high places for violence as long as it serves one or the other political purpose.

The complaint is not that 'the' insurgents or 'the' security forces are playing into each others cards by blindly promoting the escalation of armed violence. The complaint is that political thinking is caught by militarisation and that this is so nicely couched in nationalistic terms, that the nation drifts towards self-immolation on the altar of senseless violence.

INTERNATIONAL COMPLAINTS

The unexpected outburst of violence at this scale took friend and foe abroad by surprise. The friends were even more shocked than the foes, as they were accustomed to the rosy picture painted of Sri Lanka by scholars, Western Buddhists, Western Christians, returning visitors, students and tourist agents. How is it that reality proved so different from the image one was acquainted with? That this was largely because they themselves sought in Sri Lanka what they missed in their own part of the world, inclusive of spices and sun, only now starts dawning on them. They just saw what they wanted to see.

Nevertheless, the pinkish tint with which their own day dreaming was tainted, must have been exported from the island itself, they insist. Is not the national air carrier flying the peacock banner of paradise? Is not tourist promotion relying on glamorous multi-coloured pictures? Is not the very religion of the people so extolled as to turn the island into a place of Swamis, Saints and Arahats?

Once the lid was off the bucket, the complaint continues, only ugly tints seem to be available. And not just the international media menagerie should be blamed for it. What is unleashed by way of propaganda by the parties involved in the minor war waged in Sri Lanka does its utmost to paint the other the ugliest possible. The litany of names tagged on the adversary is the best proof of it.

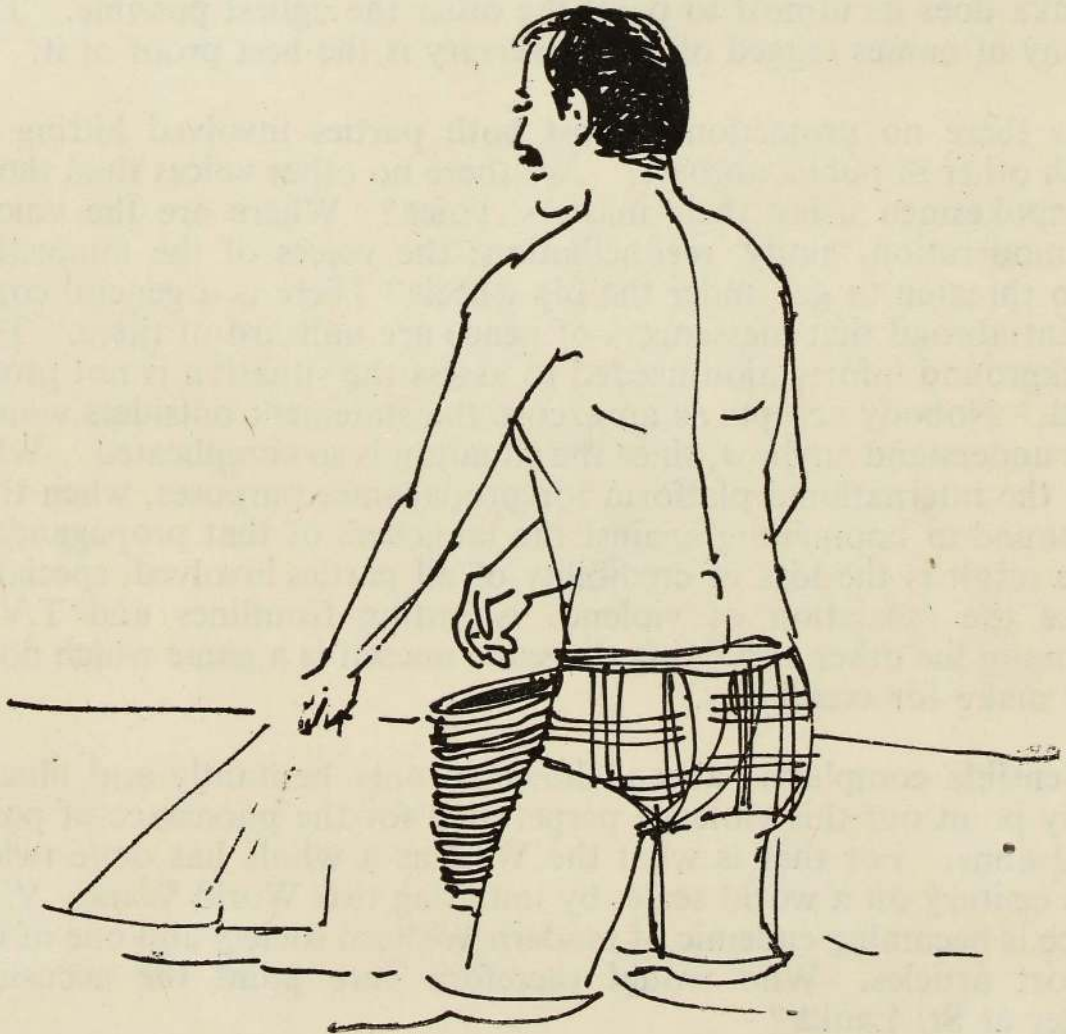
Is there no protection against both parties involved hitting at each other in public abroad? Are there no other voices than those of spokesmen using their masters' voice? Where are the voices of moderation, amity, reconciliation; the voices of the minorities who threaten to get under the big wheels? There is a general complaint abroad that messengers of peace are unheard of there. The background information needed to assess the situation is not proffered. Nobody accepts as an excuse the statement outsiders would not understand anyhow, since the situation is so complicated. Why use the international platform for propaganda purposes, when this is bound to boomerang against the launchers of that propaganda? The result is the loss of credibility of all parties involved, specially since the escalation of violence is hitting frontlines and T.V.? Blaming the other and doing the same oneself is a game which does not make for credibility.

Sensible complaints abroad however only hesitantly and blushing point out this violence perpetrated for the pursuance of political aims. For that is what the West as a whole has done twice this century on a world scale, by initiating two World Wars. Violence is becoming endemic of modern Western society and one of its export articles. Who would therefore dare point the accusing finger at Sri Lanka?

Yet, among friends one must be frank and also about weak points one has oneself. And, whether one likes it or not, the media are splashing the ugly news at least once a week. How can one remain silent? The perplexity stays and increases.

The most penetrating complaint, made with much hesitation and by a limited group of very sympathetic Lanka watchers is at the same time a hidden or open request. It therefore simply phrased as a question. "Do you people of Sri Lanka, especially your religious leaders, who all like recalling the pristine purity of their own religion, have a practical remedy for reconciliation between clashing ethnic groups, a problem we in the West are suffering from more and more and more ourselves? More than your tea, your beaches, your spices, your smiles and meals, we like you to draw from your own wisdom and experience and help us out ourselves."

The complaint thus turns into a promise: "We will go out of our way to obtain from you the broad information, for better or for worse, but always for mutual understanding which you can give and we need. We ourselves will provide you with same to see clearly our strong and weak sides. And already we start trembling, thinking how we will be able to do so, so little do we know ourselves and so much do you know us. Let this booklet be a beginning of a more enlightened way of communication and mutual exchange."



CHAPTER 3

POLITICAL MYTHS

Myth is here not taken in the rich sense of the word: "an ancient story offering an explanation of some phenomenon", but a neurotic deviation of it: "a commonly-held belief that is untrue" (Chalmers). Even in this sick sense, it holds normally much truth, but this is so distorted or hidden, that much courage and skill is needed to unravel it and turn it to use for finding real truth. The myths listed below can easily be heard. Though probably nobody holds them literally, also nobody is fully free from it. They are called 'political' since they co-determine politics.

WESTERN MYTHS

These usually are connected with myths prevailing in the West about the East, the Orient, Asia. They do not need to be gone into here.

The most popular myth is that Sri Lanka is paradise. Bits and pieces of old mariners' stories about their visits to the beautiful isle, cut loose from their context and inflated for propagandistic reasons, float around. Waving palms, bleached beaches, robed monks, charming women, smiling children, butterfly-like tea pluckers, brown fishers and farmers, stick on pictures and posters in the minds. Beauty is confounded with goodness and paradise appears. The backlash on the day that this dream proves not to correspond to the reality of poverty, corruption, violence, is the more annihilating.

Then there is the island as the repository of Theravada Buddhism in all its pristine purity. The people are serene and need little, the monks are wise, the doctrine is incarnate, the world is close to nirvana. Silly as it sounds, this image is vividly alive in the West, although all exception of pure purity is suspect. Moreover, it is the very negation of the basic teachings of Buddhism, also in its Sinhalese form. The longing for what one cannot find in oneself's soul and surroundings is projected to exist elsewhere instead of accepting the void and working on it, as Buddhism teaches. Buddhist publications for the West, explaining the doctrine, are mistaken for descriptions of daily (also political) life in the island.

Finally there is the vision of Sri Lanka as a laboratory where one or the other development models, constructed in a study or hammered out in discussion groups in the West, which should fit Sri Lanka as it looks sizeable enough to be properly monitored (and controlled).

EVERYBODY'S MYTHS

There is big brother (sister, mother) India, in whose shadow little Sri Lanka tries to show off how well she walks on her own feet. He (she) has to sneeze and the newspapers in Sri Lanka carry the news, pondering about implications this has on the nation's (Sri Lanka) health. It is like the adolescent having left home but never married, who keeps aloof just to come running when the occasion arises. Although all Sri Lanka watchers take her as a grown up adult, she herself does not. There is this love-hats relationship to India which disturbs really good relations. History books depict India alternatively, even simultaneously as the source of all good and of all evil; invasion after invasion bringing destruction and aiming at genocide. Tamils visiting Tamil Nadu, across the Palk Straits, receive a mild shock at arrival for they feel how different they are for the first time. Tamils 'repatriating' to India or taking refuge there are not welcomed as they expected they would have been: they were not prepared to be treated as aliens. The umbilical cord has not been severed yet. Has there ever been one?

The CIA is of a different, all pervading presence. They are here and there and everywhere, even in the American Embassy. Master-minds as they are, they master every situation and twist it to their advantage. And money galore. Useless whispering because the more one whispers, the more they hear. All the ministers are on their payroll. The insurgents as well. Better talk loudly about them, in order to prove that one is not, oneself. A nice society conversation anyhow. What a pity if they should do their mole-work elsewhere. Morning breakfast would be boring.

The British did it much more cleverly. They were low in funds and had to economise. So they invented the nation: the NATION. That is what they themselves never could manufacture at home. They had the EMPIRE to play with, and at home the QUEEN. But for foreign consumption they constructed something they called the "nation": a nebulous vehicle made of heroic values; male driven; in times of peace painted gaily; in time of war decked with armour. Made in Britain, everlasting like the Morris. On Sundays it is a stretchable passenger car, good for the elite and suitable for the crowd. On Weekdays a goods lorry, for heavy loads like myths, weaponry, parades, medals, national dresses, flags and hymns. Tell me which nation you have, and I will tell you who is your enemy.

Race has more of a horse. For that reason races once were popular in Sri Lanka since they filled the race-course with admirers of the white race without having to admit it. Then came the time that the whole country was turned into a racecourse. That ended the game and started a professional gamble. No more horses ran; it now was the people.

Betting was replaced by voting. Some had to run for life. It was then that the police learned how to close their eyes in broad daylight, in order to avoid clashing with gang leaders.

Territory is the latest acquisition in the myth zoo of Sri Lanka. It is a cross breeding between a solitary elephant and a swift mongoose. It has, as all well-bred animals, a hunting ground of its own, carefully fenced and defended. Whoever threatens to enter, is barked, hissed or spat at, since the animal is, in true Lankan fashion, quite versatile. So far so good, and no reason for a place of honour in a Zoo. But this particular animal has extraordinary habits. It shifts its habitat according to its moods or appetites (scholars are not unanimous in their explanation of the phenomenon). Its mood is its habitat, some say. What is more, it pretends it can read, but only titles to land. So where a title is dug up, or dug in the habitat is, complete with hiss, rattle and claw. If the title is unreadable, or threadbare, a new one is made with the help of brush and sword. What does the animal have its territory for? Well, first of all to have a quiet siesta, undisturbed by the bustling of somebody else's deeds. His own deeds are there to wave for coolness. After siesta one can think then about what to do with the habitat. Another Zoo, apart from that of Dehiwela? A tourist resort? A Free Trade Zone? First the hiss and the spittle and the bite, for that is what makes a territory worth the while.

MINORITY MYTHS

The most cherished myth of any minority, is to be one. With it goes the feeling of being persecuted, neglected, down-trodden, forgotten. The majority is inflated into a balloon of any likeable size. The minority looks nicely threatened against this looming background. After the group picture is taken, the big balloon is deflated by a single pinprick, since it served its purpose. It is not nice to be rescued from the minority position, since all privileges, (most of them indirect ones) also disappear. Being a minority facilitates playing games, like hide-and-seek, musical chairs, snakes and ladders. A great advantage of being a minority is to feel isolated. Take millionaires, film stars, politicians, religious leaders. Of all of them there exists only a few absolute minorities. Imagine if there would be many. The more minority one is, the higher one moves. Take a President, Pope, I.G.P. Mahanayake, Basnayake, Dahanayake. Supreme minorities are to be protected, lest everybody try to reach there.

An advantage of being a minority is that one can look down on minorities within one's own ranks. Would one pay attention to them, where would one as a minority be? It is therefore always better covering up the rank and file, so that a unified homely, cosy image can be kept up. See how united they are, those poor minoritarians; should they not be recognised and supported?

Anybody trying to explain to the lower ranks (who, usually are in the majority but are trained to think of themselves as a minority needing no defence where they really are positioned), can politely be refused a hearing. This is already a minority, is it not? We can take care of ourselves. Why unite a solid unity? Granted, there are weak spots also in minorities, but they should be made as invisible as possible, as otherwise the majority might make ill use of them. Where do majorities recruit the mercenaries they need to keep down minorities? Among minorities' lower ranks; understandably, since then mercenaries have no way to go anywhere and must wipe out all memories of childhood and home.

The complement of this pride of one's own minority position and refusal to see minorities within the own fold, gives the minorities glee in analysing fissures in the majority's apparent unity. Their eyes are trained in observing minorities' cracks in facades and leaks in plumbings. It gives a safe feeling, to see the big house shaky and about to crumble, for that provides the lullaby for rocking one's own cradle of safety.

Survival of the fittest is for those who fit. Look at the components more than at the composite; the elements more than the unit; the cracks in the mosaic. Facets show bigger than they are, sometimes as big as the whole thing. Minoritarians are masters in meditating on details. They are exquisite accountants, counting and recounting trees till the forest disappears.

Lest one starts thinking that minorities are of a contemplative nature sitting back to count the traffic passing, the tight-rope-walking-myth must be presented as typical for active minorities. It is the supreme act of balancing, worth the best of circuses. The difference is, that in the circus there is a beginning to the rope and an end to it. Therefore also to the act. In the mythical world of active minorities the rope is without beginning and end. The act is timeless. It is a plaything, a pastime, a profession. It is the great escape, but since it is never ending, it never starts. Balancing is the brave, clever, strategic, diplomatic thing. It earns lasting applause and acclaim. It is the survival of the unfittest.

TAMIL MYTHS

Tamil Nadu, the most South-Eastern State of India, is the motherland of all Tamils. They have their soul and inheritance there. The Tamil communities all over the world, from the Pacific via Malaysia to the United States, from Europe via the U.K., again to the States, needs a place of their own where race, language, religion and customs are kept pure, in a holy reserve. That cannot be Tamil Nadu, as it is part of Aryan dominated India. An independent Tamil State in Sri Lanka where Tamils have their roots could be that sanctuary.

In Sri Lanka, there is one Tamil Nation. All those who have Tamil as their language should rally round the Tamil flag in order to maintain the nation's existence. To a nation belongs a territory. In times of danger that territory will be the haven to all Tamils of the whole country. In times of peace they can look up to it in order to check their identity from everywhere. National security is a prerequisite for national unity. Therefore the best of weapons are not good enough to defend it. Tamils all over the world must morally and financially support this nation however small it is, as it serves as their anchor. For that very reason the whole of Tamil Nadu should rally round to support a struggle for territorial national Tamil unity in Sri Lanka for their own sake.

The Tamils in Sri Lanka are one great happy family, but for the unhappiness inflicted on them by those who are jealous. All critique is based on jealousy. All family prerogatives in present day Lankan society have been earned by hard work and typically Tamil industry. Social mobility of other 'ethnic' groups in the country is politically motivated and basically anti-Tamil. What is to be expected is only discrimination and oppression. Therefore Tamil national unity is necessary and has to be cemented in political institutions.

Dravidian culture is older than Aryan civilisation. The peaceful Dravidians were pushed down South by the militant Aryans. Aryans all over the world are aggressors. They aim at levelling other cultures wherever they can, making also use of their own religion be it Buddhism or Christianity. This is the last stance for Dravidian culture in the world, where the thin spreading of Tamil groups of low culture abroad has sapped the vigour of the mother country, but also shown what Tamils are capable of. Dravidian culture is no more limited to India and new centres must flourish elsewhere. A new Tamil globe is in the making.

Sri Lanka naturally is part of India, more precisely Tamil Nadu, always has been and rightfully should be. The presence of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka is a thorn in the flesh of all Tamils. Who knows, one good day, the glorious invasions of yore will repeat themselves!

Tamils are far superior to the Sinhalese. The latter are lazy, unorganised, spoilt, unreliable. The Tamils are industrious, born organisers, frugally careful, trustworthy. Sinhalese are spend-thrifts, Tamils thrifty. Sinhalese cook with coconut oil, the Tamils with sesame-oil; the first stinks, the latter has no smell. Sinhalese overeat, Tamils are choosy. Sinhalese are sloppy in every respect, Tamils are skilful, intelligent and inventive, they are planners and strategists. Sinhalese are carefree to the extreme, volatile, mob inclined. Tamils are co-operative, restrained, reflectful; they

cultivate the spirit of solidarity among themselves and are generous to others. Sinhalese are adventurous but give up easily. Tamils are explorers, step by step, and stick it out.

SINHALESE MYTHS

Sri Lanka is Sinhalese territory. Non-Sinhalese others are invaders, intruders, remains of colonial supremacy, aliens. History started with the arrival of Prince Vijaya, coming from the North of India, with ships full of male companions. From nothing they catapulted themselves into a new nation, carrying on the Aryan tradition. They brought irrigation engineering, architecture, literature to the island. What was before has been more myth than reality, not worth recording, good only for paleontologists. This peaceful political and cultural entity regularly was disturbed by invaders, who went on eyeing the island from neighbouring Dravidian India. Tamils are the hereditary enemies of the Sinhalese, trying to domesticate them or even wipe them out. Thus Sinhalese language, culture, Buddhism must be defended. One nation, one culture, one language.

Sri Lanka is the only spot in the world where the Sinhalese, with their unique culture, language and religion, have their home. They have no other place to go to. Eternally threatened by greedy neighbours across Palk Strait they have to choose between being driven towards the South and from there into the sea or fight. They lost the North already to them, reason why Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa are in ruins. All lost areas must be reconquered, then only the Sinhalese can be at rest. Wherever there have been Buddhist sites, Buddhist sanctuaries must be revived, with a protective population of Sinhalese around, not only to feed the monks. Aliens can be tolerated only in so far as they fit in.

From its beginnings in Sri Lanka, Buddhism has been the state religion. Protection by the state is a traditional feature of Buddhism and essential for its deployment. Monasteries and religious sites need large properties in order to maintain themselves. This has been so from the beginning. The nation maintains them as it is based on their supreme service.

Sri Lanka is the country of Asia, where Theravada Buddhism has come to stay. Degeneration began when degenerate Christians from the West landed on its shores. In the Kandyan Kingdom Theravada was maintained in its full strength and orthodoxy. Mahayana Buddhism had some influence at times in Sinhalese history but always as a fringe feature and is now extinct, leaving Theravada Buddhism the field. A renaissance took place, in the 18th and then onwards from the 19th century which opened world perspectives for Sinhala Buddhism. It is in advance on modernisation, still retaining its spiritual force. The West is in decay and is

turning now towards Sri Lanka for salvation from its mental ailments. Moreover, Sri Lanka is on its way to blend Theravāda Buddhism and modernity, including a consumer society, which will possibly spearhead world development at large.

The Tamils of Sri Lanka are clannish to the extreme, misers who only use their money for amassing gold and advancing the clan. They profited in the colonial and post-colonial days and conquered such power positions, that they can be deposed, only by force, in order to make room for the rightful claims of the Sinhalese who are still paying the price of four centuries defending their identity against world powers. The June 1983 action against the Tamils in some of the Sinhalese areas—had they only been organised in all of them—has been only regrettable because of the misuse which has been made of it by the Tamil lobby abroad and by the Western Media, smudging the unblemished image of Sinhala Buddhism. But it was a justifiable national action, in retrospect confirmed by the invasion of the country by militant Tamils from Tamil Nadu from where they operate to conquer the country.

CHRISTIAN MYTHS

Christianity has been revealed by God Himself and by providential guidance became the religion of the West. Modernity is the fruit of this development. For that reason the establishment of Christian Empires across the world has been a blessing, even in disguise, as thus Christianity could spread. Now its major weight is shifting to the Non-Western world, where its faith is better understood than in the West where people sacrificed to materialism. The traditional Asian religions, including Buddhism, at best prepares the road for Christianity. It is through social service, better than through force, that Christians can spread the Joyful Blessing of the Gospel, together with the healing force of prayer. Christianity is self-convincing and well presented, will gain the Asian world for Christ.

In Sri Lanka the Christians have been as much victims of foreign powers as e.g. the Buddhists. Nevertheless they are still accused of the evil, foreigners who were bad Christians, have perpetrated in Sri Lanka. Development aid coming via Christian organisations shows that the Churches stay free from the political motives of Western Christians. It is through the practice of Christian charity, small or large scale, that the purity of the Christian message is shown. If Christians are given preference in their own institutions, this is in order to demonstrate the spirit of brotherhood reigning there. Non-Christians are admitted there as a sign of Christian charity to whoever is in need of help or service.

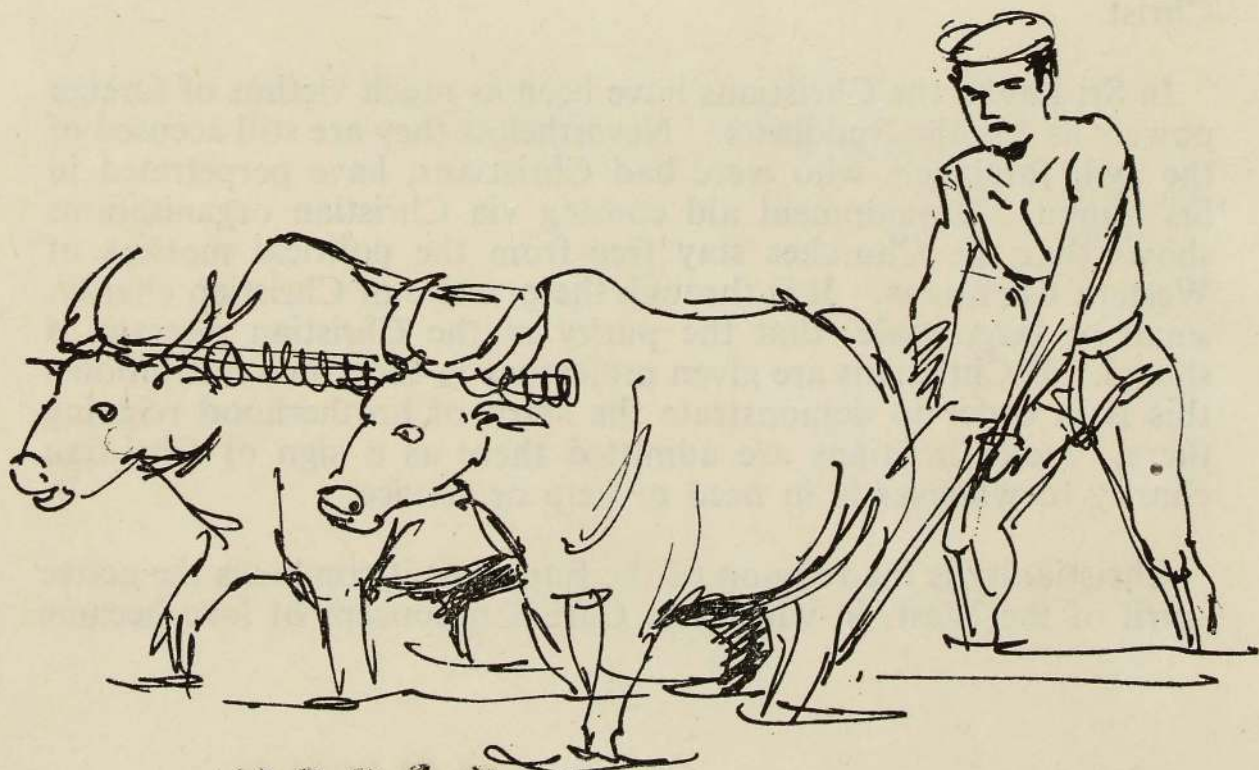
Christianity is the religion of the future, as it combines the active spirit of the West, in which the Christian concept of love became

almost incarnate, with the mystical spirit of the East. The conversion of the whole world to Christianity is the final aim of all Christian activities, but through charity and the power of the example. As such it cannot be matched by any other religion.

The Asian religions in Sri Lanka are other-worldly and whenever they have active organisations in the practical field, they picked it up from the Christians. Buddhism e.g. is not a religion but a philosophy; it is essentially self-centred and places all stress on the loss of self. Christianity is essentially personal in its focus on God and man. It is not a philosophy but faith in God's direct revelation. It builds this world in obedience to God, as a means to stately pass on to the other, final world. In one life this must be done, with God's grace combined with personal effort.

As citizens of Sri Lanka Christians have their duty to fulfil all citizen's obligations, but they are simultaneously citizens of the one family of men which is created by God. As in Sri Lanka the Christians do not belong to one particular race, a nation or culture. They are the natural bridge between opposing sections of the population. They are a model community spearheading a future in which peace replaces strife, harmony, competition.

Christ was for the downtrodden, as all human beings are children of the same God, who has a predilection for the humble and meek. The Christians, in this spirit, are the advocates of all the downtrodden, as they themselves, in their own community, already have overcome all differences of race, caste and creed. There is a revolutionary community, in permanent opposition to those in power who inevitably use it to stay there at any cost. The Christian doctrine filters down to a social message, opposing evil. Especially when organised, by all means. Non-violence is the ideal way to liberate the oppressed, but if these take up arms to defend themselves against institutionalised violence or physical oppression, these arms must be blessed.



CHAPTER 4

MUTUAL ACCEPTANCE

The rate at which countries are breaking up or are kept in a state of permanent alarm is not hope-giving for Sri Lanka.

Under the title 'When countries die', The Economist of November 1st, 1985 asks this question:

"Does the world have to accept that there is a thing called Lebanisation, and that it is spreading? Some countries simply go on the blink for a generation or more. They cease to be countries except in name. There is nothing decent insiders can do. Horrified outsiders, it seems, can only avert their gaze.

"A few years ago, people thought differently. It has been a twentieth century orthodoxy that the scores of millions of people locked in hate-producing prejudice the world over will one day be educated into getting along sensibly (if not lovingly) with each other. This assumption, born out of enlightenment by wishful thinking is applied almost piously to those run places where people who bow to different totems happen to be bunged together in one town, one cluttered island, one valley where the water runs too thinly for all.

"Education and modern technology have not healed the old wounds of history. Quite a few new ones have been hacked open by the holy modern dogma of self-determination."

Many compare the state of affairs in Sri Lanka as if the country is heading for a situation similar to that prevailing in North Ireland, Cyprus or Lebanon. Instead of indulging in self-fulfilling prophecies, it is better to take stock of the components which are more likely to be parts of a mosaic than of a gunpowder mixture.

Since these pages try to summarise what looks hale and hearty in the Sri Lanka of today, so that the island's future becomes a signal station for the future of the world, what follows cannot be a formula for the solution of the present conflict, nor a blue-print for a long-term future. It cannot but correspond to the mosaic found in the island's history and situation. Even the sketch for a mosaic is already a mosaic. The usual way of looking at Sri Lanka from outside, as has been said before, is determined by the viewpoint chosen: paradise found, paradise lost, paradise to be constructed. Sympathetic Sri Lanka watchers might free themselves of this paternalistic opinion and be bold enough to look (far) ahead.

TAKE THE LANGUAGE

However one may regret the way the Sinhalese language has been catapulted into the position it occupies now, one cannot but be happy that there has been a Switchover from English as the State language to Sinhala. Accepting Sinhala as the State language might be psychologically difficult for those who see this as a sign of imperialism and racism. Accepting it as the lingua franca however is a practical attitude which does not need to have any such connotation. The minorities who have another language as their mother tongue, for Tamils and Muslims, Tamil for Malays, Malay for Burghers and a culturally important minority of all ethnic groups English, in actual fact have accepted Sinhala as their lingua franca. Their distribution over the country and the historically grown economic tilt towards the South-West coast and the plantation areas, makes it compulsory to know the Sinhalese language.

Turning the language issue into a political one, is putting the horse behind the carriage. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956 was a retrograde step, however urgent it was, to upgrade Sinhala. This was demonstrated by the very political leaders who pushed the Act through. They saw to it that their family received the best of training in foreign languages, especially English. Those who grew up in the expectation that their own interest was best guaranteed by a Sinhala Only education, were hit hard when it came to finding jobs in shipping and trade, in Middle East or West. The barrier which was supposed to have been removed forever barring the Sinhalese masses from attractive jobs, was even heightened.

In a more restricted, but not less effective way, English is the other lingua franca of Sri Lanka. Without proper knowledge of English not only jobs abroad or jobs with an international dimension are off limits, also in the country itself lack of English is an obstacle to e.g. that thorough study of Buddhism or Christianity.

MULTI-LINGUAL

The high horse of one language, one people and one whatsoever else usually is ridden by those who look down from their seat of power, like the power of knowing other languages and being at home in other cultures and countries, on pedestrians. Actually the mastery of one or more languages other than their own is not the privilege of those who spent many years in school studying foreign languages. Without practice, bookish knowledge usually does not make students good conversationists or writers in foreign languages. People with little school education but in practical need of languages often are excellent polyglots, without being linguists.

Why are students and intellectuals educated at the expense of the small people, protagonists of the use of only one language for others? There is often a deep arrogance in that attitude, if it is not merely a political gadget.

That people know their mother tongue well is quite a different issue. But does not that always imply delving into the language(s) that mother tongue evolved from over the centuries? Must one's mother tongue be purified from alien elements? It would dwindle to a schoolmaster's tool. The more one knows about the corners of the world one's mother tongue came from, the more one is delighted about one's own culture. Cultures grow rich in cross-breeding.

The lingua franca taught universally in Sri Lanka is accepted by the population as a language of high standards and a great tradition. Those who seem to be afraid it would disappear from the globe's surface should be reassured. The reluctance now existing to apply oneself to study languages other than one's own, would eventually disappear. A situation like in Switzerland could arise, where no Italian speaking citizen feels less Swiss and Swiss school children study willingly two or three languages. Tamil, a great language in itself, would be accepted as the language of the State across the nearest border. Since one quarter of the population is of Tamil culture, also others could enjoy it.

The reason why the average white American is possibly the most ignorant person, internationally seen, is that he or she still has not discovered the neighbours in the South, who are Latins, and the Asians in the West. Thus they are lazy to study any other language than American and expect everybody else in the world to chew English and gum.

NATIONALISATION OF SINHALESE

India is perhaps not the best example to quote, for various reasons, yet it is the country in the world with the most languages, each with their own wealth of literature and their political significance. A remarkable, though often uneasy national unity. Hindi, though not accepted loudly by vocal language groups in States of their own right, is practically the official language and English is the language of commerce, administration and general education.

Indonesia is an even more remarkable example in Asia. The Javanese of Central Java (the other ethnic groups on that overcrowded island have their own language and culture) speak a refined and ancient language. They also form the absolute majority in the country. Yet the official language as well as the lingua franca is Bahasa Indonesia (Malay) which had to be evolved from a language generally spoken in trade and commerce.

Sri Lanka naturally is unique and it is of no use to draw on a model from elsewhere. Sinhalese has all the qualities of a highly

polished language. It has come from an agricultural situation, through Sanskrit and Pali, and is coined inextricably by Buddhism. It has been under the patronage of the monks and they took their task seriously. Since independence the language has developed speedily. Sinhala is taking new strides. It is becoming a language of commerce, sea faring, industry, research, science, computerisation. It not only can stand the strain, it will flex its muscle, fill its skin, lubricate itself. To purists this may seem a threat, but it is not only the price Sinhala has to pay for its new role, it also will thrive, albeit different from when it was under the monks' tutelage. Being a lingua franca is living a frankly open life.

Many will be bi-or-tri-lingual, considering Sinhalese as their 'national' language, as the Welsh and the Scots and even the Irish regard English. The Sinhalese themselves will have in one disadvantage; they might take it easy, like the Americans, the Japanese and the French do, and not learn any other language than their own. The British paid dearly for their once splendid isolation.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF ENGLISH

It is a good thing that nobody can claim Sanskrit, Pali, Greek and Latin, dead languages now, but still very useful to turn them into weapons for his own purpose. English is in a different situation, but a brief look at the language map shows that it is not the privilege of the English anymore to have it as their mother tongue. Half of modern English literature (English-English) is written by Irishmen. Provided American is accepted as English, there are more Americans than Englishmen. And what about English/Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians? Black Africa is divided into French speaking and English speaking nations, with Portuguese speaking enclaves, and they will remain as languages of Africa. Spanish and Portuguese are the languages of Latin America. But all over the world English is the lingua franca.

Many non-English in non-English speaking countries talk, write, think and dream in English.

A look into the future shows English branching out into a vast tree of brands of English. In the USA Black Americans, who have no other language than English, are developing an English of their own which school and college education cannot avert.

There is more to it. The English taught formerly in the colonies was bookish, urban and victorian. Still methods of teaching English there do not reflect the international and intercultural status of English in the world.

English has to be freed not so much of colonial bonds, but of class and city alliances and 19th century hangovers. This is specially true in simplified teaching of English in village schools and tutorials.

It is not a question of grammar and idiom, but one of the mentality going with the language.

A person knowing two or more languages well, has access to many layers of human history, can compare, is able to translate and knows him or herself to be a distinct person.

Grappling with English as an internationalised language is trying to internationalise it. This is not the same as making it cosmopolitan, as then it starts living a life of its own, in libraries, motel lounges, classrooms, reports. Internationalised English is everybody's domain, where one's accent adds flavour, one's idiom perspective, one's mastery of grammar the freedom to consider the king's English a tribal language of its own. Mastery of one's mother tongue, or of another language than English, keeps English in its proper place, as a vehicle.

MUSICAL CHAIRS

People like tagging each other. It is an easy way of recognising others, placing them, defining one's own place. Colour, features, height, build are features nature and culture use to show distinctions among people. Soon race and class discrimination enters, for the tags human people attach to each other usually contain moral values, negative or positive. Apartheid was born from racism.

DE-TAGGING

How fortuitous such labels are, becomes evident when they are exchanged, like playing musical chairs. A topical game in Sri Lanka would be using the tag terrorism off and on. Both parties involved in the armed struggle call violence perpetrated by the opponent terrorism, What basically is a political game using military means, becomes a real war, which only seems to be solved with military efforts. Civilians are the main victims of preventive or retaliatory action. Civilians rally round opposing camps. Terror turns into the major strategy. Then the tags 'terrorism' and 'genocide' are ready for use, but only for application to others, painting the devil black. De-escalation starts with a long look in the mirror.

This pausing to stop the merry-go-round of apartheid, racism, casteism, escalation of violence is a moment of truth. One might otherwise find that running in circles becomes a pastime. Changing places, at least mentally, comes next. This first takes the form of listening. Getting into somebody's else's skin might result from

this. There is also an instant way of breaking the vicious circle of prejudice. Somebody's friend or relative belongs to the group one is prejudiced against: the heart takes over from the hardened head. Friends are made, also with a purpose. Once the heart however, itself is hardened, only gods and saints, bodhisattvas and arahats can help' Devotion can be the beginning, truth may be the end.

It all sounds easy, but it is not. Without attractive accompaniments musical chairs are boring. Looking critically at labels one is accustomed to, removing them to see how things look like without, trying those labels on oneself, is much more than a game. Yet it is worth making zealots smile at their own zeal, politicians blush over their slogans, preachers stumble over big words, big talkers turn small.

EMPLOYMENT FOR ALL

The employment available in the Middle East has defused much tension in the labour market of Sri Lanka. The vast majority of those who found jobs there come from the broad population and are Muslims and Sinhalese. Nobody protested against this selection which went to the poorer lot of society. If employment in the Middle East is attractive from the point of view of earnings, it is also isolation from family ties which count so much in the surroundings the recruits come from. Luxury goods willagers bring home from their labour abroad do not conceal the trying time they had abroad. No politician tried to make political gain out of this issue; few were those who pointed out the hardships undergone abroad.

The same is true for employment in the Free Trade Zone. There also the hardships are untold and little attention is given to them. No political case has been forged out of the 'ethnic' composition of the-mainly female-Population of the labour force in the F.T.Z.

Comparable is the situation in the plantation sector, which traditionally has been worked by one 'ethnic' group, considered to be aliens at that. No other community in the country claims to repace them, however much as a result of the 'repatriation' of vast numbers of 'Indian' Tamils, vacant places are filled up by workers from neighbouring villages (but the large estates high up in the mountains hardly have villages close by).

It is only when land is reclaimed for colonisation projects that emotions run high and politics come in to play. Understandably, since territorial claims are quickly put forward by those who think in terms of politics.

Such emotional feelings seem to be based on outdated agricultural views on history and on the future, put forward often by those who

have no inclination whatsoever to do agriculture themselves. The exceptance of disproportionate shares in labour connected with even extreme hardships, shows that the nation as a whole is much more realistic than many who like acting as her voice, seem to realise. That is a natural point of departure for thinking along non-ethnic lines where employment is concerned; a base for any mutual acceptance in a mobile society. Crusaders' ideas are completely out of touch with what happens in society.

MUTUAL AMNESTY

The difference between a conflict solved by negotiations and one overcome by victory and defeat is that the latter is never a solution. War is born from war, defeat clamours for victory, victory defeats itself by maintaining its gains of high cost and calling for a backlash.

Settlements are based on mutual acceptance, i.e. on mutual amnesty. Amnesty normally is the benevolent sign of the mighty, showering their grace on those below or a cover-up action in situations of stress.

A legal system also needs amnesty to make up for loopholes, mis-trials and backlags in courts or overcrowding of prisons. This amnesty is a onesided, albeit landable exercise.

Mutual amnesty is different. Take the colonial system. It just broke down. No colonial crimes were taken to court and then punished or forgiven, Collaboration with the colonial powers was not brought to trial. In Sri Lanka the brown Englishmen simply took over. Is that the reason why neo-colonialism successfully succeeded colonialism without most people even being aware of it? The anger in the former colonies went underground and erupts now and again violently, only to be suppressed with more violence. The former colonisers, still keeping the purse strings, now have taken on the role of preachers, advisors and consultants, much to their own advantage.

The two world wars are a different example of the same. Nations were punished, war criminals hanged, but this affected only the defeated. World War II was the fruit of World War I. The defeated were even given help to get again on their own feet (and more), for obviously selfish reasons by the donors who donned the robe of magnanimity.

How many leaders of countries were perpetrators of cruelties they now punish rebels for? They blew up buses, cut down children, killed at random, all for the sake of liberation—of whom?

What Sri Lanka could do for herself and the whole world, is exercising mutual amnesty. That is not a pact between some politicians. Communities who have suffered beyond imagination, are the amnesty seekers and givers in this case. Would Sri Lankans be capable of achieving what hardly anybody did before?

While the War in Vietnam was on, somewhere in the Netherlands a Buddhist Vietnamese monk took part in the Maundy Thursday celebration, the day of reconciliation of the Christians. At Sermon time he was asked forgiveness by the officiating priest for all the harm done to his people over the centuries by Christians from the West. He looked surprised, not understanding. The request was repeated. His surprise was complete. Human beings cannot forgive, he said, they are all in the same game. They only can start each time anew together.

DE-ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE

Once violence has become an institution, e.g. a mafia, it is hard to eradicate. It has so many roots and ramifications, and above all, protection. Protection is bought and enforced on. Organised thuggery and crime are used and bought at their turn, for revenge, levelling of the road to power, blocking the road to power for others.

In theory the easiest to jointly remove is the urge among zealots (not only among the young) to remove injustice perceived, by physical force. In actual practice this is not so easy. There is always a cause to fight for. A just society is a thing one can pray for but scarcely hope for. Constitutional means are long-winding and without assurance. It looks good to take a short-cut. In modern global society moreover armed rebellion is an international phenomenon. It is a mixture of crusader's holy war mentality, vengeance, adventurism, fun and fashion. The social justice fought for is not necessarily justice for all, whatever the slogans may say. Police measures are unavoidable, but require an experienced and wise policy. Policing however, does not solve problems; at best only contains them. Unless social justice is promoted by visionary but practical movements, the short-cut will lure people into violent rebellion.

Systematic violence by security forces—which is basically different from outbursts, unless these become part of a system—is easier to be stopped. In a system meant to uphold law and order, measures can be taken. But if something has become a custom, everybody knowing and conniving, the public becomes partisan. Recent violent outbursts in English inner cities have shown how much depends on policing but also how many kinds of policing there are. Security forces also need their own security, morally and physically. Not only the authorities, also the public must support and provide this security and not turn the security forces into scape-goats. Once

established, institutionalised 'thuggery, employed within the political system, is the one which tends to be least exposed and therefore most difficult to be surfaced. Yet this is the condition for its disappearance. Its existence is a public secret and every child knows the names of the sponsors. Exposure and punishment of a few prevents the eradication of the institution; it might promote the employment of thugs against the thugs of others. Mutual amnesty would be the only way to start de-escalating this endemic violence. The public is as guilty as the actual sponsors, be it by silence, connivence, glee; perhaps the thugs are the least guilty.

RE-WRITING HISTORY

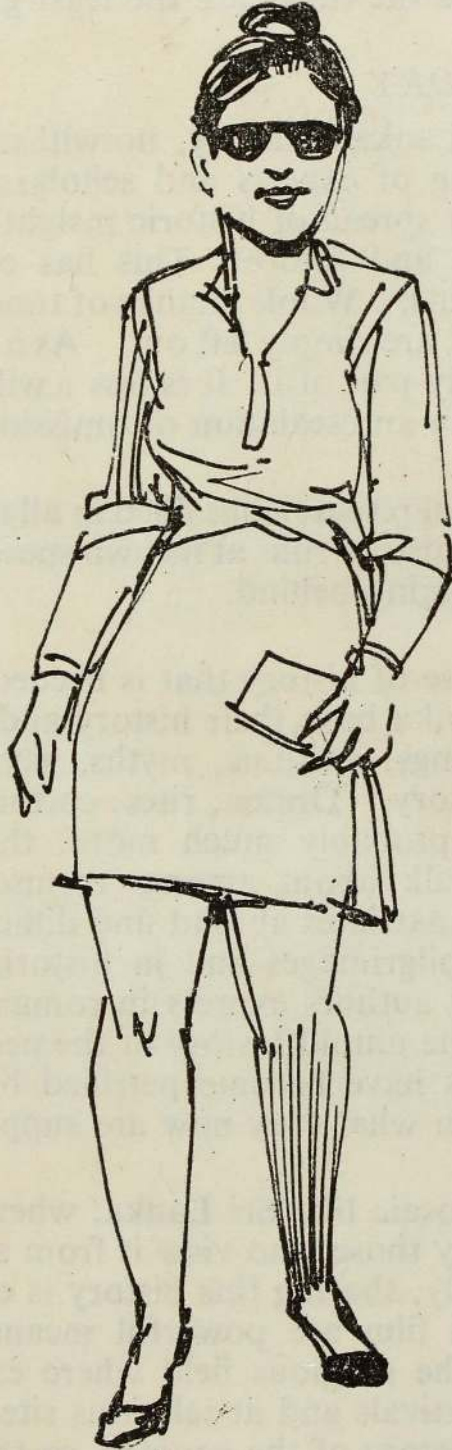
How little of Sri Lanka's history, notwithstanding the eminent work of a long string of experts and scholars, has been written! How little the present spread of historic insight prepares the nation to face both present and future! This has come to the fore in recent regrettable events. Whole chunks of time, slices of the population, features of life, are simply left out. As a result much is taken for truth which is only part of it. It is less a wilful and surely not a skilful distortion, than an escalation of omissions.

Waiting till historical research has filled in all the holes, would be a historical mistake, as history runs at its own speed and the historian's pace necessarily is lagging behind.

It is a different sense of history that is needed. All communities and groups in Sri Lanka have their history and this history is alive today. Tales, buildings, customs, myths, sayings, convey experience with a long history. Drama, rites, customs, stories are other vehicles. But also, probably much more, the unspoken things. What, e.g. women talk about among themselves, what migrant labourers here and expatriates abroad find difficult to express, what is searched after at pilgrimages and in historic sites, what poets, bards, playwrights and authors express in romances, fiction, theatre and films, expresses the untold history of the people, but also of the mighty whose images have become petrified but who might have been so different from what they now are supposed to be.

In a population mosaic like Sri Lanka, where the beauty of the mosaic is seen only by those who view it from a viewpoint where it can be seen completely, sharing this history is called for. Schools, radio, television and film are powerful means for doing so. It happens already in the religious field where each other's festivals are shared, during festivals and at religious sites. But as there are gaps in the written history of the country, so there are gaps in this sharing. Without an effort made those holes become traps, like uncovered manholes in city streets. Fortunately there is already much common ground. What is more: the people have more in

common than generally is acknowledged. They can digest more diverse impressions and influences than educationists, politicians, religious leaders, like admitting. Television, expatriate work abroad, tourism, free market competition, make the broad public life in a pluriform world anyhow.



573 ZBJ

CHAPTER 5

ROLE OF THE RELIGIONS SHOCK WAVES

The eruptions shaking the island's complacency were rooted in deep dissatisfaction with trends of development. The riots of 1958, the Insurrection of 1971, the guerrilla warfare in North and East from 1976 on, the riots of 1977, 1981, and specially July 1983, were as many symptoms of this awareness. Instead of getting at the roots of a multifaceted problem facing the whole country, each and every eruption was partial and partisan, making conflicts only more complicated and bitter. It can be argued that the spiritual forces in the country, through their experience in exercising a moderating influence, prevented worse. It is amazing that the country did not turn into permanent chaos. It was more than law and order which were each time restored, it was ties of friendship, kinship and spirituality across the confines of visible communities and creed, which held the country together. The depth of these roots in the country can only be guessed; they can hardly be underestimated.

But apart from insider publications and work in small groups, the religions did not seem to be aware of their potential role in facing these recurring eruptions. Traditional views and an appeal to tradition marked their leaders' interventions. Statements were mainly paternal admonitions, accompanied by abstract assessments.

There were a few occasions, in which religious leadership was shown. One issue has been the so called schools crisis of the early sixties, which brought smouldering tensions between Buddhists and Christians almost to eruption. Notwithstanding much confusion and bitterness, both parties emerged with new experiences and mutual respect. It is true the follow-up ended mainly in academic work and ceremonial invitations. But after so many centuries of strife and suspicion between these two religious bodies, it is surprising how quick a new phase of relationship was entered.

There was a dramatic event which ought to have drawn the attention of all religions, since the whole country was affected. It concerned the most silent minority, namely the 'Indian Labour' in the tea and rubber estates who moreover were stateless. The tragic episode of 'repatriation' was passed over in uneasy silence. A few groups tried to awaken the general interest for the plight of these unfortunate people, 'repatriated' to a country they never had seen, and the others remaining in semi-bonded labour, but their

voice was hardly heard. They did not find the right wavelength either to speak to the whole nation nor cared to touch common religious grounds.

JULY 1983

The terrible shock of the July 1983 riots, which the President called a crisis of civilisation, accelerated guerrilla warfare in the Tamil North and East. It also has been this traumatic eruption and its aftermath of attacks and retaliations, which inaugurated a new stage in inter-religious collaboration. In a way this was its real beginning. What happened before in this domain could be seen as mere finger exercises.

Members of all religious communities found togetherness. They stepped into the open after the eruption of the riots and the ensuing escalation of violence. If no further riots occurred, this surely goes to the credit of the government. But governments are helpless where it concerns mass emotions. They can clamp down but the ill-feelings go underground. Religion largely operates non-formally in Sri Lanka. It inspired many to join citizens' committees for ethnic harmony. Inter-religious groups sprung up spontaneously and did some profound searching for the root causes of the problem together with practical work. Had the new practice of mutual respect and ceremonial invitation not prepared the field, had not scholars of all religions done research on the affinity between the religions, had not social workers of all religions worked together in grass roots development work over the years, this daring inter-religious co-operation would not have sprung up. The conflict was the auspicious time for joining hands.

NEW DIMENSIONS

Rapid changes take people always by surprise, and that should be so, otherwise they would not be rapid. Had the Prophet Muhamed, the Buddha, Jesus Christ and so many religious leaders not gone, through a trying life experience, drawing on the search, suffering joys, wisdom and foolishness of generations, they would not have taken the decisions they did. Had they not taken the time to withdraw, allowing this decision for life to mature till enlightenment arose or was given, they would never have reached or received it. They assembled communities, often reluctantly, as they knew from their own life experience how long it takes to reach wisdom and truth. They suffered in those communities from the woolly motivations of those joining who expected instant solutions and short-cuts.

In organised religions this tension between ideal and practice always has been and never will cease. Therefore, the need for daily application and practical experience. Religions in Sri Lanka

are no exception to this rule. Now the eruptive changes in the country placed a new burden on them.

The search for truth and wisdom is inherent to all religions but seldom yet has been done in common. Rash amalgamation or hurried re-thinking would lead only to new sects and new onesidedness. The common people often have more experience in this field than the officials, even if they cannot formulate the affinities they sense and practise. Sri Lanka has a great tradition of worship in pilgrimage to inter-religious places. Also sharing of festival food, respect for others' fasting, participation in funerals, weddings, and life-marking days, all with profound religious dimensions belong to the existing mosaic of religious life. People have not to be taught all that, they tread common ground. The religious leadership, rightly cautious about shallowness replacing depth, tends to play safe and draw lines meant to be guidelines but eventually becoming hurdles. Thus they keep themselves and their followers apart.

The 'lay people' are also the dispensers of charity, compassion alms, service; different names given to that pillar of all religions which is the care for others.

INTER-RELIGIOUS CO-OPERATION

Taken unawares by the recent violence the religions in Sri Lanka have started taking stock of the situation in connection with their own tradition. There is also already experience regarding joint efforts in a variety of fields. Action goes along with prayer, meditation and study. Those involved have grown confident that inter-religious co-operation leads to more depth, brings out differences positively, and guides towards a common truth. They therefore also have the support of the religious leaders.

Religions in Sri Lanka all have their particular forms of organisation. These are largely inherited from experience elsewhere. There is a natural hesitation to touch them lest the values embedded in it erode. There is also a reluctance to have an evaluative look at them in view of their usefulness for the whole community. In this time of 'ethnic' strife, in which the mosaic of Sri Lanka society threatens to be torn apart, that look would be highly beneficial. The least to be gained is an increase in the skill of handling religious organisation. Their value in a multi-formous and changing society would be gauged. It should not be left to the anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists to do so as their so-called objective view is often biased and short-sighted.

Virtue has been cherished and exercised, also systemised over the centuries. They obtained their particular and often peculiar form

and direction in the different religions. Attitudes towards food e.g. have a common connotation in all religions in Sri Lanka but are vastly different in focus and exception. The same is true for sharing, patience, solidarity, hospitality, assertiveness, justice, honesty and so on. Since they are all directly and indissolubly related to actual living, they offer attractive areas of practical collaboration and joint reflections. Virtues and attitudes have their personal and societal dimensions, reason why this area of mutual enrichment and correction is within reach.

VIRTUES

LONG-SUFFERING

Visitors of the island who read that it belongs to the twenty poorest countries of the world are usually still struck painfully by the poverty in which the mass of the people live. Poverty not only according to Western standards. A small minority lives at ease, the majority of the population just survives. The art of survival survived in the country, an art which steered the whole of humanity with the exception of small elites like royalty, aristocracy, physicians, priests and others who feed on the people across the ages.

This art of survival has been the main stay of the religions of the island. That is the reason why the fifth religion, mentioned before, is the most universal of all, closest to the people. A profound experience with and understanding of suffering, its root causes and inter-personal textures, fuels in the religions of Sri Lanka the virtue of long-suffering which is the motor of survival and the source of happiness even in impossible situations.

Expression is found in sayings, rites, stories, teachings and writings. They are so profound, that, as all agree upon only those who combine the personal experience with the enlightenment which arises from it at the given moment, can comprehend its depth. That is how poor people can grow wise and rich ones foolish; the opposite can happen as well, as no state of life holds any privilege in that matter.

The smile of the Sri Lankans, their versatility and their balance, derive from this age old grappling with the stark realities of life and death.

These survivalist attitudes, highly differentiated not only according to religious traditions and practices, but also to the temperaments of groups and individuals therein, can turn sour as religion can. The fittest can monopolise survival, the altruists be sucked by vampires, the egoists look virtuous. The art of survival can water down to fatalism.



JUSTICE

In Sri Lanka, as in other parts of the world, the religions have their weak spots and black marks. The caste system is one blatant example, whatever good can be said about the solidity it once gave to community. Religious dignataries have lifestyles above those of the people who support them. The voice of women is heard little in religion and policy decisions are made by males. Alms largely replace efforts towards rehabilitation. The rich and mighty are awarded prominence beyond the requirements of respect for genuine-responsibilities. Party politics cleverly makes unholy alliances with religion.

On the other hand officials of the religions and religious leaders render uncounted and selfless services to the stragglers and the abandoned, preach the undiluted and therefore often uncomfortable truth, and some are in the forefront of the promotion of human rights. Above all, great are the numbers of those lay people who live according to the rules of justice preached to them.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Nothing is less measurable than life's quality, but also nothing is more visible. Visitors to this country are struck by it, statisticians rate items like expectancy of life, lifespan, literacy among the highest in the world. Difficult as it is to assess quality of life, even harder is the task to find out how it is promoted. Nobody in Sri Lanka doubts the religions' contribution. The question at present is, whether they will be able to go on fulfilling this task with the rapid changes of life Sri Lanka is undergoing. The hitherto seemingly peaceful society of Sri Lanka, with its unique mosaic of differences and harmony threatens to fall apart in opposing fractions, largely on political lines, but often under the guise of religion. The same is true for the surf of modernisation splashing over the country. Will a survival society turn into a consumer society without losing out on the qualities it enjoyed? Or will accumulation of goods lead to the great showbusiness seen elsewhere in the world? The explosion of drug abuse among youngsters is a clear sign of what happens when the traditional pattern of protection (and over-protection) gives way for a free for all and at all cost.

The religions of Sri Lanka have not been insensible to these rapid developments. Change and the dangers inherent in it are assessed in the nostalgic way of praising the past, glorifying the pristine purity of the early origins. Others depict a far or not so far future in which all tensions will be overcome and a new paradise turns up. A few even predict the end of this world. But a solid and growing body of people in all religions are aware of what is at stake.

DECISION MAKING

For the first time in their Sri Lankan history the religions are challenged with overall change. But was not the introduction of Buddhism a change which kept on changing the nation till our days? Was not the introduction of Christianity a long process which led to confrontation as well as to good neighbourhood? The reason why the new rush of change, took the religions unawares was that on the whole they were backward looking, while hoping for the best in a distant future. But had they not been alien elements at one time themselves? The process of change, inherent in any conversion, remained unobserved. The means for scrutinising new changes were not at hand. The permanent conversion which every religion claims for its life, had come to a halt and the stress was more on individual than on social and political improvement.

As a result, politics and religion too easily got mixed up, Western categories (the secular and the religious, the devotional and the spiritual, democracy and totalitarian regimes, elections and parties) were welcomed without a proper investigation into their credentials, even for the West. Nation and nationalism, nation-state, state-religion, as they had grown up in the West in the last few centuries, were proudly taken over without much reference to their origins and credentials. At the same time, to safeguard the country from excessive imports, the 'national' was glorified chauvinistically. It went, like the advent of independence, all too smoothly.

The accumulated crisis matter, however, burst out.

That is how violence as a political institution crept in and came to stay. It was not even recognised as the monster it is, as it changed colours like the chameleon, sometimes looking even very pious.

ACTIVITIES

Activities and beliefs of a religion essentially belong together. It is fruitless to discuss where inter-religious collaboration should start in time. Experience shows that cross-religious contributions cut across the usual opposition between activists and theoreticians, intro and extrovert, which lames organised religion so often.

The dividing line in difference of opinion, both doctrinal and methodical, seldom coincides with the adherence to this or the other religion. Whenever real roots are reached, it shows how divergent beliefs within the same fold can be. Provided inter-religious collaboration is not a mini power game, but the sincere endeavour of all participants to be of service to others, everybody will gain in virtue and insight.

Rites, Prayer, Meditation, Religious Teaching

The impact of religious practice on the person's and community's life, thought and action cannot be over emphasised. Immeasurable as their 'vibrations' are, they are not less real. The educative and formative values of those practices are of eminent importance. Where does a person more wholistically receive, absorb and digest signals received from others than in prayer, pious listening and meditation? It is in this field also that the present harmony movement in the different religions finds its most universal application. It must be assumed that if prejudice and hatred have taken deep roots it also is in this area. Leaving out others in prayer is the ugliest form of apartheid.

Listening, Counselling, Pronouncements

Where can down-trodden people, or those who are caught in the fireline between two fronts, turn to tell their tale, unless to people who are open hearted and can keep secrets but also pronounce the truth, whoever is hurt by it? This exactly happens in inter-religious groups monitoring crisis situations. They do not stop there, but also advise and reconcile. Defenseless victims find inexpensive advocates there. Pronouncements by such groups will not be of the nature of pressure groups. Since they have links to all parties involved, they use means other than statements or stencils. Reconciliation is different white washing; it is not propaganda either.

De-escalation of Violence

Once violence escalates, human skills seem to fall short of reconciliation. Yet it is there that inter-religious groups can be most effective, although least applauded. They are embedded in the different communities through their members. Their impact reaches deep and far. Escalation grows with retaliation. Violence is condemned by more and more people. No civil war has grown from the conflict although the germs were there. The general opinion is that not military but civic forces can end the conflict. Defusing the tension has happened so many times, that the preparedness to accept a meaningful compromise is widespread. This is all extremely fragile, but thin ice is also good for skating; it only needs more skill.

Amnesty

It is taken for granted that amnesty is needed to end the conflict. Nobody can give amnesty to the other without accepting it from the other as well. Rebels of yesterday are sitting at the negotiation table today and will have a seat in parliament or cabinet tomorrow. A government decried as nothing less than satanic, is then accepted as legal. Inter-religious groups have a precious task in keeping the fire of reconciliation burning and kindle it whenever the wind is

auspicious. Mutual amnesty, after all the horrible things which were perpetrated on both sides, is so novel an exercise, that it is unthinkable to happen, unless all reconciliatory forces in the country are mobilised.

Uprooting Violence

It would be utopian to hope that Sri Lanka will ever again be the peaceful paradise projected yesterday.

But it is possible to uproot the institutionalised violence which raises its head regularly: indiscriminate brutality at interrogations, armed resistance to obtain human rights, politically patronised thuggery. This is not a matter of one day. Even less the act of finding scape-goats. Complete institutions with all their ramifications have to be up-rooted. There is little hope that governments will be able to fulfil these tasks, since they are involved. Blaming government only will not help either. A skilful and patient, but stubborn and persevering weeding out action would be required. If inter-religious groups fail, who will succeed?

Sharing

Perhaps the most elaborate social custom of Sri Lanka is the system of sharing. Sinhalese Buddhists call it 'dana' and they have a refined practise based on a great vision. This sharing is not only that of food, but also of sound, roof, vehicle and not to forget sweat. Like all human institutions, also this sharing can deviate e.g. when the wealthy and powerful foot the food bill and let the others sweat. The training one gets through the manifold features of sharing as an institution in society has its significance. These sharing practices are border-crossing events, where rites accompany meritorious action in favour of the community. Further borders can be crossed, deeper significances expressed, all-embracing action mounted.

Projects, Programmes

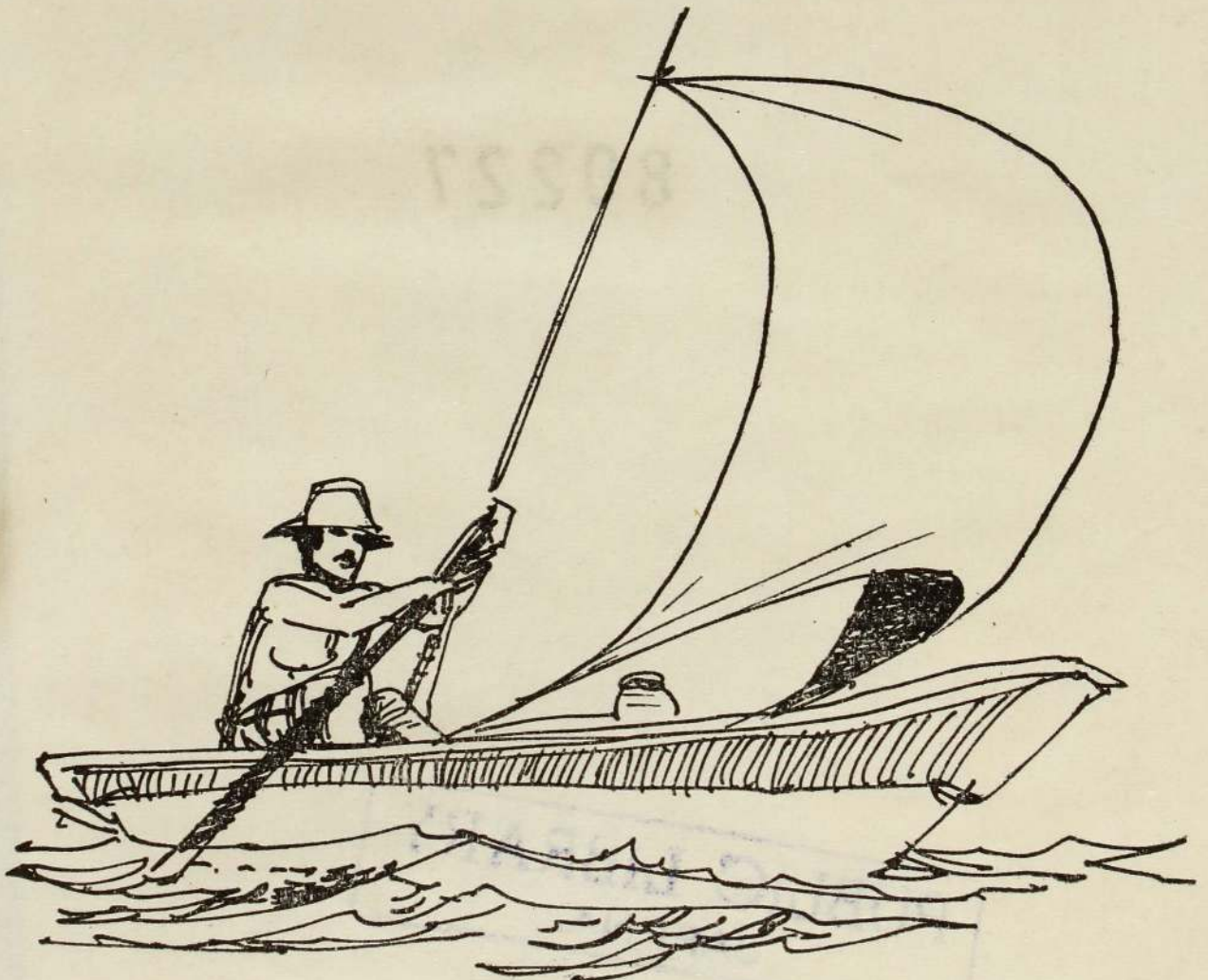
Small scale projects at the grass roots, which not only answer urgent economic needs but also make those who benefit stand on their own feet and speak their own language, do not replace or compete with large scale ones. But they are nursing grounds for the mentality genuine social action requires. In this field much inter-religious experience already exists and has attained respectability. This is also a testing ground for the sincerity of interreligious endeavours. For poverty, abandonment, exploitation, oppression are symptoms of the illnesses of the whole community. Treating the symptoms will not suffice, the root causes would have to be tackled.

Education

Too much is left to the schools in education. Non-formal education is better spread, cheaper and more effective but less recognised. The religions are specialised in non-formal education, without however being sufficiently aware of it. They tend to look up to formal education as the principal and efficient means of overall education, leaving it to paid personnel to run the system. Culture is the most prominent and typical area of non-formal education, also the most neglected and underestimated. The religions who had once almost a monopoly of culture, all too easily give it out of hand. Inter-religious collaboration could do wonders in this field.

Re-Writing History

In Sri Lanka, the religions have their own history, intimately interwoven with that of particular communities and the nation as a whole. As it stands, much of this history is biased. What is more: it is seldom a help towards understanding other religions and communities. Much re-feeling, re-thinking and re-writing is required; an excellent field for cross-religious and inter-cultural projects indeed.



The main aim of the school is to provide a better standard of education for the people of the district. The school is situated in a beautiful spot and is well equipped with all the necessary facilities. The school is open to all children of the district and is free of charge. The school is managed by the Government and is under the supervision of the Education Department. The school is a model school and is a source of inspiration for the people of the district. The school is a great asset to the community and is a source of pride for the people of the district.

In the year 1927, the school was opened and has since then been a source of inspiration for the people of the district. The school is a great asset to the community and is a source of pride for the people of the district. The school is a model school and is a source of inspiration for the people of the district. The school is a great asset to the community and is a source of pride for the people of the district.

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SRI LANKA has become international "news" in recent days through its anguish caused by violent groups more than from tea and tourism. The international media know how to find this tiny island on the globe. Rash judgement deplores the loss of the former "paradise" in the Indian Ocean.

The outside world however also counts observers who take more time to make up their mind about what happens. These critical but sympathetic Sri Lanka watchers gathered insights which also for Sri Lankans are of topical value. They found an interpreter with an experienced pen which has been describing specially the exquisite food culture of Sri Lanka.

This book explains why many in the Western world specifically grant Sri Lanka the capacity not only to overcome the present conflict, but also set an example for the whole world in inter-cultural and inter-religious living. Sri Lanka is the only country in the world, where all four (some say five) world religions live together in a tradition of more than tolerance: affinity. This is spelled out with amazing frankness, but while causes for strife are laid bare, also the roots of harmony are shown.

Although a serious undertaking, the language is vivid, ranging from lyric to witty, almost cartoon like.