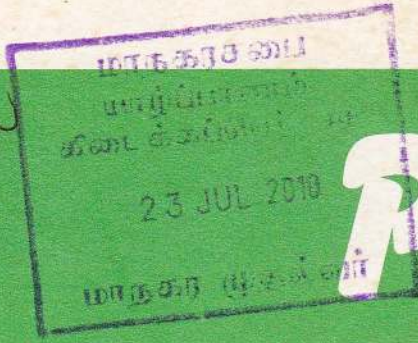


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# POLITY

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<b>IT WAS ELECTION TIME</b>	<b>03</b>
<i>Jayadeva Uyangoda</i>	
<b>FROM 'POST-WAR' TO POLITICAL SOLUTION</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>N. Shanmugaratnam</i>	
<b>THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Pradeep Peiris</i>	
<b>RECONFIGURING PATRONAGE POLITICS</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Minna Thaheer</i>	
<b>CULT OF CELEBRITY &amp; THE ELECTIONS</b>	<b>26</b>
<i>Maya</i>	
<b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>	<b>28-42</b>
<b>IN MEMORIAM</b>	
<b>THE EVA I KNEW...</b>	<b>45</b>
<i>Vijita Fernando</i>	
<b>IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER</b>	<b>46</b>
<i>Rohini Hensman</i>	
<b>ON THE BEACH</b>	<b>48</b>



## COMMENTARY

### THE ROAD TO PEACE?

With the conclusion of both Presidential and parliamentary elections, Sri Lanka has emerged out of a period of political uncertainty as well as a drama. President Rajapakse's control of the ruling party, the regime and the state seem to be quite firm now. High in the country's political agenda are issues of ethnic reconciliation, sustainable peace-building, political and constitutional reform and rapid economic development with strong component of redistributory justice. Will these become elements of the regime's immediate reform agenda as well?

It is now one year since the dramatic demise of the LTTE. The threat of the re-emergence of the LTTE's insurgency does not seem to be realistically possible in the foreseeable future. The absence of the civil war provides an unprecedented opportunity to for President Rajapakse to quickly move in the direction of reconciliation, peace-building and state reform.

Despite the election pledge to abolish the existing presidential system of government, the issue that has been given much priority is the changing of the constitution to enable President Rajapakse to be in power more than two terms of office. The government is also keen to introduce some electoral reforms. They too seem to have been designed to ensure the prolongation of the present ruling party's control of the legislature. The Left parties of the U.P.A coalition have now come out against this constitutional reform agenda of President Rajapakse. India too seems to be telling the government to expedite constitutional reform for further devolution to address minority grievances.

Why is a regime with so much control over the state and the legislative process reluctant to initiate political reforms that are a historic

need for Sri Lanka to successfully move out of decades of crisis and stagnation? Ironically, in the recent past, regimes failed to implement constitutional reforms on the excuse of lack of adequate power. During the PA regime of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the ruling party had the full control of the executive, but a bare majority in the legislature. During the UNF regime of Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, the ruling party had a simple majority in the legislature, but no control over the executive at all. During the first term of President Rajapakse, the ruling party just managed to survive in the legislature by means unconventional methods. At present, the Rajapakse administration does not have any of these institutional obstacles to implementing a meaningful political reform agenda. Where, then, does the problem lie? Perhaps, it lies in the nature of the historical conjuncture of state formation in Sri Lanka.

The idea of firmly establishing a unitary and centralized state in post-civil war Sri Lanka seems to be at the heart of the political agenda of the present U.P.A regime. The argument for a de-centralized and federal state has come essentially from ethnic minorities, some reformist sections of the Sinhalese polity and a few external states like India, the USA and some EU countries. With the military defeat of the LTTE, the argument for a unitary, centralized and militarized state has become stronger in the thinking of those who run the Sri Lanka state at present. Sri Lanka has actually entered a historical conjuncture which may be not conducive to state reforms in the direction of devolution, civil war political conjuncture.

However, looking at this issue from a broad political-historical perspective, one can argue

that Sri Lanka seems to be getting itself into a post-civil war peace trap. In this peace trap, the absence of LTTE insurgency is viewed as a sure sign of peace in the country, to escape from this peace trap, the government needs to reach out to ethnic minorities or the Tamil people who suffered immensely during the last two-to-three years of war with the LTTE. The government should also listen to some counsel from countries abroad.

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### Editors

Jayadeva Uyangoda  
Kumari Jayawardena

Executive Editor and  
Circulation Manager  
Rasika Chandrassekera

### Editorial Assistant

Chandrika Widanapathirana

## POLITY

No. 12, Sulaiman Terrace  
Colombo 5, Sri Lanka  
Telephone: 2501339, 2504623  
Tel/Fax: 2586400  
E-mail: ssa@eureka.lk  
website: www.ssalanka.org

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# IT WAS ELECTION TIME: WHAT DO THE TWO ELECTIONS SAY?

Jayadeva Lyangoda

2009-10 is Sri Lanka's Year of Elections. A series of elections for provincial councils was held in 2009. The ruling UPFA won all of them with huge margins over the main rival, the UNP. Then there was the most important, the presidential election held on January 26, 2010. The incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa won defeating the main challenger, former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka. The parliamentary election in April saw President Rajapaksa's UPFA coalition government return to power with a near two-thirds majority. Meanwhile, local government elections will reportedly be held towards the end of the year.

## Presidential Election

Although the election was held in January 2009, it was constitutionally due in 2011. President Rajapaksa began his first term in November 2005. A presidential term, according to the Constitution, covers a period of six years.

Among the reasons why President Rajapaksa advanced the presidential election by two years was perhaps the belief that it would be easier to defeat any rival decisively while his popularity was at a considerably high point. The military victory over the LTTE in May 2009 made President Rajapaksa's popularity in Sinhalese society phenomenally high. Rajapaksa and his advisors may also have thought that a decisive victory at presidential election would set the terms for an equally decisive victory at the parliamentary election, constitutionally due in April 2010. In electoral calculations, an incumbent President would have to think carefully about the sequencing of presidential and parliamentary elections. The usual tactical thinking is that if parliamentary elections are held first, the president would run the risk of his own parliamentarians showing lukewarm interest in the presidential election, where the fate of the president's next term is decided. Thus, advancing the presidential election before the parliamentary election can be seen as a calculated measure taken to enable the president to re-assess authority over the legislature.

The most surprising development in the run up to the presidential election was the coming forward as the main challenger to Rajapaksa of the former head of the Army which that helped the government defeat the LTTE in a two-year intense war. Fonseka's candidacy was backed by a broad opposition coalition that included two unlikely allies, the right-liberal UNP and the left-nationalist JVP. The fact that the UNP, the main opposition party, accommodated General Sarath Fonseka as the common opposition candidate was also surprising. The usual opposition presidential candidate would have been the party's leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe.

What is it that persuaded him to accept, endorse and then back a total newcomer to politics as the common presidential candidate? Two factors may have shaped Wickremesinghe's thinking. The first was the realization that Rajapaksa would in any case win the election because of his popularity and therefore the opposition could minimize the margin of President Rajapaksa's victory by fielding a candidate with a greater potential to pose a credible challenge than Wickremesinghe could. The second consideration was perhaps the opportunity that Fonseka's candidacy offered to the UNP to weaken the UPFA's authority.

However, Wickremesinghe's endorsement of General Fonseka's candidacy created considerable internal dissent within the UNP. Some did not like the JVP's presence in the coalition and their backing of Fonseka. Others did not like their party conceding to a non-party candidate. Still others were worried about a military man heading an opposition alliance. For other UNPers, the UNP backing a candidate outside its ranks was not acceptable. Ultimately, the UNP continued with the new alliance. Fonseka contested the election under a new electoral symbol, the Swan.

Fonseka's surprising decision to challenge his former commander-in-chief at the presidential election also had significance at a different level. It indicated that the war coalition which President Rajapaksa presided over for nearly four years had split from within. Fonseka and the army was a key constituent of this war coalition. It is Fonseka who



seemed to have convinced the sceptical politicians that defeating the LTTE militarily was possible and feasible. He displayed a determination and ruthlessness that was not found in any of his predecessors. In fact, those linked to the government were quite proud to say that they had "found their own Prabhakaran to fight Velupillai Prabhakaran."

"The fact that the JVP became the main sponsor of Fonseka's candidacy also indicated that the UPEFA JVP coalition, which was a key component of the war coalition, had reached the end of the road. The JVP, we may recall, had been pushing for a hardline military approach to the ethnic conflict within the UPEFA coalition even during the time of President Rajapaksa's predecessor, President Kumaratunga. A third factor was Fonseka's decision to leave his position as the newly created chief of Defence Staff to launch his political career by challenging his own commander-in-chief. Hostilities developed at a personal level between him and the leaders of the government's defence establishment. What has become clear is that there was a bitter personal fallout between Fonseka and the Rajapaksa brothers, leading to a huge ego clash.

When the presidential election campaign began, the Fonseka candidacy seems to have introduced an element of uncertainty to the political process to general. It appeared that the government establishment was deeply divided. The government therefore took steps to play down the significance of Fonseka's challenge. However, when the election campaign intensified, the Fonseka factor took firm root in the political debate, and he acquired greater voter attention than the government anticipated. This led to something like a panic reaction on the part of the UPEFA government, and gradually, stakes at the election became extremely high. In the last two to three weeks of the election campaign, the government, probably 'left no stone unturned' in its campaign strategy, using any means necessary, to stem what appeared to be a wave of public support for Fonseka. At the end, the government succeeded by pushing Fonseka into defeat.

### Campaign Issues

President Rajapaksa launched his re-election campaign from a position of relative strength over his main rival because of the popularity he had enjoyed within the Sinhalese electorate which constitutes about 70% of voters. However, Rajapaksa's intention was not just to win, but to win decisively and with a considerable margin, over his main rival. Rajapaksa probably wanted to secure at least 60% of

the vote. Such a victory with a considerable winning margin could have given him what he probably thought as a 'clear mandate,' which could then influence the outcome of the subsequent parliamentary election as well.

Meanwhile, the nature of President Rajapaksa's re-election campaign changed in response to the challenge posed by the main opposition candidate, Sarath Fonseka. Fonseka presented himself as the military hero of the victory over the LTTE, and soon a competition began during the election campaign as to who should get the credit for the military victory. Rajapaksa claimed credit for being the political leader who managed the overall context, and Fonseka claimed credit for actually conducting the war. In the process, the Rajapaksa campaign also presented the argument that Fonseka represented a dangerous tendency. In this argument, even a retired military man entering politics and becoming the president would endanger democracy, create political instability and be the beginning of the end of civilian democracy in Sri Lanka. Thus, portraying Fonseka as a potential military dictator, in the mold of Uganda's Idi Amin in the 1970s, was a key element of Rajapaksa's election campaign. As opposed to Fonseka, the campaign portrayed Rajapaksa as the symbol of stability, prosperity and the only leader to ensure the voters a better future. In fact, the advertising company that was entrusted to 'sell' the president to the electorate coined the slogan "Prosperous Future" (*Sobo Aragatharyak*) as the key theme. To contrast the personality of President Rajapaksa against Sarath Fonseka, the military man in uniform showing his black gloves, the advertising company invented the braud label "Sensitive Leader" (*Sarveadi Nayakarya*). The media was flooded with campaign advertisements highlighting his virtues.

One of the most notable strategies of the Rajapaksa campaign was to dominate the media, particularly the state-controlled media, until election day itself. Three things became clear in this campaign, the power of ideology, the power of excessive use of the media, and the power of mobilization. We will discuss in some detail the issue of ideology separately.

Meanwhile, Sarath Fonseka's election campaign seemed to have been politically managed mainly by the JVP, with the support of the UNP. The fact that two parties with totally opposing ideologies and perspectives could come together to back Fonseka was surprising. Still more surprising was the decision of the Tamil national Alliance (TNA) and a few other small Tamil groups to back the candidacy of Fonseka whose ruthless counter-insurgency strategy had decimated the Tamil nationalist rebellion just a few months previously. As key



campaign themes. Fonseka focussed on his own military record, government corruption, concentration of power in the hands of the President and his immediate family, and governance. Particularly controversial was a statement he made to a Sunday newspaper, in the midst of the election campaign, suggesting that the defence establishment may have committed 'war crimes' during the last days of the war. President Rajapaksa wasted no time in using the 'war crimes' story to his advantage, portraying Fonseka as a traitor who betrayed his own army, the president and the country. When the propaganda campaign progressed, it became clear that Fonseka's unguarded comments to the media had cost him dearly.

### Alliances

A presidential election is usually an occasion for political and ideological forces to forge new alliances. It is also the case that these forces tend to gravitate around the two main candidates, thereby creating a bipolar framework of electoral alliance making. President Rajapaksa's UPPA is already an alliance of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, two Left parties (LSSP and CP), Ceylon Workers' Congress, National Unity Alliance, Up-Country People's Front, Jathika Hela Uramaya, Isalam People's Democratic Party and a group of MPs who had crossed over from the UNP. The JVP, a key member of the UPPA coalition government, had left the alliance to field its own candidate, Sarath Fonseka.

The new coalition that fielded Fonseka as its presidential candidate was jointly led by the JVP and the UNP. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which has been in an opposition alliance with the UNP for some years, joined the pro-Fonseka coalition. However, for two Tamil political parties, the TNA and Western Province People's Front, backing Fonseka was not an easy decision, because of the latter's role during the war. Besides, Fonseka had also acquired the reputation of being a hardcore Sinhalese nationalist who saw ethnic minorities as secondary to the majority community. However, meetings held between leaders of these two Tamil parties and Fonseka had paved the way for their supporting the 'common opposition candidate.' Later, some influential dissident sections of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) of the plantation Tamils also backed Fonseka.

### Outcome

President Mahinda Rajapaksa won the election with a comfortable majority of 58% of total votes cast. Amidst allegations of misuse of state resources and manipulation of

results by the Rajapaksa camp, Sarath Fonseka has refused to concede defeat. He has challenged the election results before the Supreme Court, although it is surely a long-drawn-out process with no immediate impact on the outcome of the election. Three key trends in the outcome of the election prominent. Firstly, the electoral districts with concentrations of ethnic minorities have overwhelmingly voted for the opposition candidate. Secondly, President Rajapaksa has obtained little support in the urban electorates, where ethnic minorities as well as the social elites represent a sizeable share of the voters. Thirdly, and emanating from the first and second, is the fact that President Rajapaksa's main and strongest support base is in the rural districts and among the voters of the majority Sinhalese community.

These three factors might weigh heavily on the policy agenda of the Rajapaksa regime in its second term. One way to interpret these trends is to say that the minorities are clearly estranged from the Rajapaksa regime. In this post-election context, resulting out to ethnic minorities, particularly the Tamils, will be essential to address this deep sense of minority alienation and for Sri Lanka's political stability. In a press interview to the NDTV television channel of India soon after the election result was announced, President Rajapaksa asserted that he had a "plan" to address minority grievances.

### Fallout

Interestingly, Fonseka, an absolute newcomer to Sri Lanka's politics, managed to pose a credible challenge to the incumbent president. He had a relatively brief period for campaigning and mobilization. The resources he had for the campaign were meagre, compared with the immense state resources that President Rajapaksa and his camp had deployed to ensure his re-election. For a week or two, there was a discernible wave of public support in favour of Fonseka, or *General Mahuththaya*, as many people on the street referred to him. Ironically, he also became the first high profile casualty of the January presidential election. A few days after the election, the government arrested him on a variety of unspecific charges including planning a military coup. Subsequently, he has been brought before two military courts on charges of corruption and engaging in politics while being in military service.

### Printers

The Presidential election campaign as well as post-election developments indicate quite clearly that Sri Lanka's dominant political class is deeply and antagonistically



divided. Reconciliation does not seem to be possible at present. The subsequent parliamentary election further sharpened these divisions and antagonisms. The tragedy of electoral democracy in Sri Lanka is that elections do not seem to help the political class to negotiate and settle its contradictions and resolve problems in the polity. Rather, elections compel the factions of the political class to resort to false agendas and in turn to invent and pursue enmities. Nevertheless, parliamentary elections are crucial for Sri Lanka to allow a new political balance of forces in the country to emerge. The post-election regime formation should show how political power is reconfigured through coalitions.

The end of the violent civil war and the dramatic demise of the LTTE have created a significant political disequilibrium in Sri Lanka. Crucially, the LTTE was not there in January 2010 to shape the outcome of the presidential election, as it was the case in 1994, 1999 and 2005. Meanwhile, although the war coalition has disintegrated from within, a new post-civil war political equilibrium has yet to take shape. Thus, although the civil war is over, the trajectory of the island's post-civil war politics is still in the process of being formed. One has to suspend one's assessment of the possible paths of Sri Lanka's future politics until the shape of the new configuration of political forces becomes clearer during the first half of 2010.

### Parliamentary Election

The presidential election was quickly followed by the parliamentary election which was held on 8, April 2010. Sri Lanka's legislature has an official term of six years. The previous parliamentary elections were held in April 2004. During the tenure of the 2004 parliament, the ruling UPFA had only a thin majority. Forty seats belonged to the JVP and nine to the JHU. The SLFP had only ... seats. Quite interestingly, President Rajapaksa, who came to power in November 2005, managed to engineer a series of defections from the opposition UNP to ensure a working parliamentary majority for his UPFA government. Ironically, most of his key ministers were defectors from the UNP. Thus, an unusual feature of the previous parliament was the enormous control that the president exercised in deciding the balance of power in parliament, notwithstanding the fact that the ruling party appeared on the surface to be weak and vulnerable.

### Re-making of Alliances

The run up to the parliamentary poll in April was the occasion when interparty alliances were reconfigured.

The fact that the parliamentary election was scheduled after the presidential election was important in shaping the outcome of the former. Usually, the party that had won the presidential election would be better placed than the losing parties in the parliamentary poll. Against such a backdrop, there were initial attempts by the opposition parties to sustain the alliance formed for the presidential election. The JVP was particularly keen to maintain the common opposition alliance, but there was opposition from the UNP, resulting in the break-up of the alliance.

Two factors seem to have worked within the UNP against continuing the common opposition alliance. The first was the dispute over its leadership. The JVP, while arguing strongly for the continuation of the alliance, wanted Fonseka to be its leader and the Swan, Fonseka's presidential election symbol, to continue as the opposition's parliamentary election symbol. The UNP was obviously not ready to continue the common opposition alliance in its old form. It wanted the UNP to be the core party, the Elephant to be its election symbol, with Ranil Wickremesinghe as the alliance's leader. The second factor in the UNP's resistance was the opposition from middle-level party activists who were potential candidates at the parliamentary elections. Many of them were worried that they would stand to lose in the lists of candidates in a broad alliance, since a considerable number of JVP candidates had to be accommodated in the candidate lists. Eventually, the UNP decided to go it alone without the JVP, as well as without Fonseka. Wickremesinghe thus revived the old UNP-led coalition, the United National Front (UNF) with the participation of the SLFP's Mangala Samaraweera wing, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, and the Western Province People's Front led by Mano Ganeshan.

### TNA

The other important reworking of alliances occurred within the TNA, the main Tamil political party. The TNA was formed in the late 1990s as a coalition of a number of Tamil political parties that were not ready to join coalition governments with either the UNP or SLFP. The core of the TNA was the old TULF, which had split in the 1990s. At the 2004 parliamentary election, the TNA had 19 seats from the Northern and Eastern provinces. Interestingly, the TNA maintained a stance sympathetic to the LTTE and often functioned as the parliamentary front of militant Tamil nationalism. After the LTTE was defeated in May 2009, the TNA managed to survive politically, and there were signs that some of its leaders wanted the TNA to reinvent itself as the continuation of the old Federal Party. In the process of



the reorganization of the TNA in the post-LTTE context, the TNA re-emerge as IATK (*Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi*,) and dropped from the list of candidates some of its sitting MPs. Few of those dropped eventually joined President Rajapaksa's UPFA, indicating the degree to which shifting of political loyalties across ethnic boundaries has become flexible and easy in Sri Lanka's contemporary politics.

Meanwhile, the UPFA continued its coalition form with greater confidence in a relatively easy victory over the divided opposition. The UPFA continued its alliances with the old Left, the EPDP, CWC, NUA, UCPF, the recently formed National Freedom Front and the break-away UNP group that had been with the UPFA government for a few years.

In terms of pre-election alliance formation, three major political tendencies surfaced during this period. The first was that there were two main centres of interparty coalition formed around the two main political formations, the UNP and UPFA, and the space for a third coalition centre was not particularly wide. The second was that to secure chances of winning, small parties, both ethnic and non-ethnic, had to align themselves with either the UPFA or the UNP. Thirdly, both main coalition centres demonstrated the character of being multi-ethnic, despite ethnic-ideological differences among coalition partners.

### Campaign

The UPFA launched its election campaign with a decisive advantage over its rivals. The fact that the UPFA had already won the presidential election just three months earlier made the UPFA's chances of winning absolutely secure. Thus, government stability was the main campaign theme which the UPFA emphasized. The UPFA did not just want to win; rather, it wanted to win with a two-thirds majority. In this campaign, too, the UPFA presented itself as the only political force committed to protecting national sovereignty, the country's territorial integrity and national unity. A crucial part of the UPFA's message to the electorate was the notion that only a strong government, led by a strong president and backed by a strong parliament, could lead the country to meet the challenges of post-conflict development in a potentially hostile dominated by the West world. The UPFA's ideology of a strong state, a strong government and a strong leader, ably articulated and propagandized during both presidential and parliamentary elections was also accompanied by a return to the ideological framework of nation-state nationalism anchored in the legacy of ethnic majoritarianism and state-

welfarist populism. It worked quite well, proving the point that repackaging of old nationalism does pay political, including electoral, dividends.

The UNP's campaign was devoid of ideology, and that ran parallel with its lackluster election campaign. The UNP, the core constituent party of the UNF, has been a party without a mobilizing ideology since the demise of President Premadasa in 1993. Under Ranil Wickremesinghe, the UNP in fact became a liberal-cosmopolitanist party, moving away from both the populism and nationalism which President Premadasa had effectively utilized for political mobilization. Without a clear ideology, the UNP lost most of its popular bases and backing, making it an elitist party, open to the external world of influence. If the UNP had anything approximating an ideology it was a weak commitment to peace, ethnic pluralism and neoliberal economic reforms. These were not effective ingredients to win elections. That partly explains why the UNP since 1994 has been in the opposition except for a brief interregnum in 2002-2003. It clear became once again during the parliamentary election campaign of 2010 that the UNP did not possess an effective ideological appeal even to its own voters and supporters. What the UNP actually lacked was an ideology and programme identified with a charismatic leadership, enabling the party to cement its hardcore voter base, usually around one-third of the total electorate, with the vast layers of floating and new voters.

The DNA's election campaign was marked by the arrest of its principal leader, Sarath Fonseka, for a variety of conspiracy and corruption charges. He was arrested on 8 February, barely two weeks after the presidential election. The DNA expected a sympathy vote for Fonseka. The DNA's campaign understandably focussed on President Rajapaksa and the alleged misdeeds of his regime. Corruption, nepotism, malgovernance, disregard for democracy and attacks on the media were issues that both the UNP and the DNA highlighted in their critique of the UPFA regime.

### Outcomes

Predictably, the UPFA coalition won the election comfortably, and obtaining more seats than the UPFA leaders would have realistically expected—a total of 144 seats out of the 225-member parliaments, just six seats short of a two-thirds majority. Under normal circumstances of the scheme of proportional representation operating in Sri Lanka, no party or coalition could get more than just a simple majority of seats. If the UPFA performance at the Presidential election



was translated into parliamentary seats, it could have obtained around 125 to 130 seats. The main contributory factor to this near two-thirds majority victory of the UPFA was the low percentage of votes received by the UNF coalition. The gap between the votes received by the UPFA and UNP in almost every district outside the North and East was unprecedentedly wide, in many instances the UPFA obtaining about 65% and the UNF about 30%. The UNF's dismal performance seems to have reflected a new tendency in this election. Voting data suggests that nearly one-third of the UNP voters did not vote at all. The UNP's lackluster election campaign, coupled with the crisis of confidence in the party's leadership, seem to have caused a great deal of apathy and despair among key sectors of the UNP's vote base. That eventually paved the way for the way for the UPFA to obtain 144 seats, normally a near impossible achievement under the PR system.

### Two-Thirds Majority?

The UPFA, meanwhile, asked the electorate to give it a two-thirds majority to "strengthen the hands of the president." This is a phrase that has been used for the past several years, particularly when those who crossed over from the UNP and the JVP had to justify their shifting of loyalties in favour of President Rajapaksa. The government rationalized the two-thirds majority requirement by the argument that a few constitutional changes needed to be introduced. However, the government did not specify what these changes would be, except to point to changes needed in the electoral system. This stood in contrast to the experience of the SLFP-led United Front coalition, of 1970 which openly and specifically sought a mandate from the people to abolish the pre-existing constitution and replace it with a new Republican one. Thus, constitutional reform was not a major campaign promise of the UPFA. However, some constitutional reforms are possible, but the nature of these reforms will largely depend on President Rajapaksa's political agenda. It will not be difficult for President Rajapaksa to find six MPs from opposition parties to ensure that he will have 150 votes necessary for piecemeal changes in the constitution.

Both presidential and parliamentary elections reconfirmed Sri Lanka's dominant two-party system as well as bicentric coalition formation. Sri Lanka has nearly 40 registered political parties. However, the largest percentage of votes as well as the largest number of parliamentary seats are usually shared by the dominant parties, SLFP and UNP, or coalitions led by them. The only exception to the dominance of the

two-party framework is the TNA or its latest reincarnation, the ITAK. In the previous parliament, the TNA had 19 seats in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. In the new parliament, it has been reduced to 14. Even then, the ITAK remains the third largest political formation in parliament.

### Decline of JVP & JHU

The decline of the representation earlier enjoyed by the JVP and JHU is another outcome of this election. The JVP contested this parliamentary election as the Democratic National Alliance (DNA), in coalition with Sarath Fonseka, the former presidential candidate. In the previous parliament, the JVP which had contested the 2004 election as a constituent party of the UPFA, had 40 MPs. This was later reduced to 30 when ten left the party and formed themselves into National Freedom Front. In the new parliament, the JVP-led DNA has only five members, four elected from electoral districts and one from the national list. The JHU, meanwhile, did not contest separately as they did in 2004. Two of its members were elected this time from Colombo and Gampaha districts. The JHU also has one national list MP.

The decline of the number of MPs of the JHU represents another tendency reflected in the 2010 parliamentary election—that is the difficulty for smaller parties in coalition with a big party like the UNP or SLFP to retain previous levels of representation. The LSSP, CP and CWC suffered decline in numbers of MPs, while the NUA, a Muslim party based in the Eastern Province, failed to get a single seat. The plantation-based Up-Country People's Front suffered a similar fate. In the UNF alliance, the SLMC presents an entirely different story. The SLMC, which contested under the UNF list, obtained eight seats, a dramatic increase from its the four seats in the previous parliament, even surpassing the JVP.

The weakening of the JVP as an outcome of the election that warrants further comment. The JVP's voter base has normally been around 5%, with slight variations. In 2004, however, the JVP received a huge share of votes when it contested in alliance with the UPFA under a single list. In fact, in April 2004, some prominent JVP candidates received more preferential votes than the SLFP candidates in the UPFA list. That was the election which gave the JVP 40 seats in parliament. The JVP also maintained the expectation that it would emerge as a credible 'third-party' in Sri Lankan politics, eventually becoming a 'second party' by replacing either the SLFP or the UNP. The April 2010 parliamentary election has now shattered that myth. In fact, the JVP is a



poor 'fourth party' after the UPFA, UNF and ITAK. It is clear that the JVP is another political casualty of the presidential election of January. Joining with the UNP to form a common front for the presidential election has cost the JVP all its left-wing, radical as well as nationalist credentials. It will not be easy for the JVP to find a new ideological plank. The JVP at present seems to be focussing on democracy, good governance, human rights and social rights. It would be interesting to see whether can reinvent itself as a social democratic entity.

The continuing decline of women's representation in the legislature is another trend demonstrated in the parliamentary election. Sri Lanka usually has had a dismally low proportion of women in parliament, not exceeding 6% since the 1930s. The figure remains today at 5.8%.

### Overall Trends for the Future

What will the new government's policy agenda be? Two issues have dominated the political debate in recent years. The first is constitutional reform and the second is a political solution to the ethnic conflict.

Concerning constitutional reform, there seems to be a consensus across political parties that the existing presidential system should be changed and or at least reformed. There has also been a strong argument to return to the Westminster-type of prime ministerial government. Reforming the electoral system is another theme. A few years ago, a Parliamentary Select Committee proposed a mixed electoral system, combining features of both the PR and First-Past-the-Post systems. But the UPFA government has not yet clearly indicated its constitutional reform directions. A government

preoccupied with stability as well political succession within the family might not be very keen to alter a secure Presidential system of government in favour of an uncertain new system. Concerning electoral reforms, smaller as well ethnic minority parties are not likely to back the changes in the PR system. It is the PR system which has enabled small parties, even parties like the JVP and JIU, to secure representation.

### Political Solution

On the question of a political solution, there seems to be two schools of thought within the government. The first argues for the 'full implementation' of the existing 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which does not require new constitutional amendments. The other, while negating the need for any political solution to the ethnic conflict, accords priority to development over devolution. In this second perspective, after the military defeat of the LTTE, the ethnic conflict has been resolved and the residual issues are basically economic and developmental in nature.

The signs at present are that the Rajapaksa administration in its second term might work out an overall policy framework combining political stability and rapid economic development. 'Miracle of Asia' seems to be the new brand name chosen for the new policy orientation. The government will also combine the new stability-development framework with an assertive form of nation-state nationalism, which will continue to juxtapose national sovereignty and independence from the West. Indications are there that an ideology for a post-liberal developmentalist state is waiting to be worked out, framed in terms of 'South Asian values.' ■

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**JAMES BROW**

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# FROM 'POST-WAR' TO POLITICAL SOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA

N. Shanmugaratnam

Winning the peace' is the catchphrase of peace activists in all post-war situations. 'Post-war' does not necessarily mean peace in the positive sense of the term, particularly where a civil war was terminated by military means. The transition from a state of absence of war towards an environment of durable peace is a politically governed process that involves structural changes aimed at transforming the conflict that led to the war while concurrently addressing the latter's consequences. 'Post-war' and 'post-conflict,' therefore, are not synonymous. In Sri Lanka, we are in a post-war but not yet in a post-conflict situation. The prime mover of this transition is a combination of three interlinked components: a political solution to the national question (NQ) based on a non-ambiguous recognition of the collective identities and rights of the country's Tamil-speaking peoples as distinct constituents of the larger Lankan social formation; a process of development that is spatially more even and socially inclusive and equitable; and sustained reconciliation and peacebuilding processes from below. Indeed, this transition is so central to the reunification and democratic modernization of Sri Lanka. However, this cannot happen without inventing a politics of decommunalization and a radical break with the majoritarian ethnocentric state-building policies and practices of successive governments since Lanka's independence.

Communalization has severely undermined demos and privileged ethnos to define and dominate the political culture of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities. The ethnos-demos tension is ever present in multiethnic democracies, but ethnocratization of the state privileges a particular ethnonation over the others by abusing and consequently degrading the democratic system. This is one of the darkest sides of Sri Lanka's parliamentary democracy. A break with decades of this practice cannot happen without a political class that has the will to reform the state by decommunalising it and creating the necessary representative institutional arrangements for devolution and power sharing in a spirit of fostering unity in diversity through reconciliation and peacebuilding. Of course this is no easy task as it means radical shifts in ideology and policy and structural changes,

but the powers that be should show that they have the will to do it by taking the first steps to set the process of change in motion.

A significant political development in post-war Lanka is that the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has explicitly rejected secessionism and violent means of struggle without jettisoning self-determination and has articulated the demand of the Tamils of the North and East in terms of a negotiable federal solution within a united country. The TNA has also said that it respects the rights of Muslims in the North and East. The federal idea is not new and the TNA has actually returned to the original position of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi – known as the Federal Party. However, the context has changed dramatically and the TNA's position is a response to the changed circumstances. Nevertheless, the post-war context is not without its contradictory moments. On the one hand, the TNA can think and act more independently as a political organization speaking for the northern and eastern Tamils, although its freedom to carry out election campaigns was seriously constrained by armed pro-government groups. On the other, the military and electoral triumph of the UPFA government has pushed the TNA to a weaker bargaining position than it would have liked to be in. The TNA's current political line and conduct resonate well with the desire of the war-weary Tamils living in Sri Lanka today, and it is also supported by a growing number of moderate Tamils in the diaspora. On the other hand, the post-war and post-election political scene is marked by more pronounced ethnic polarisation and a lingering majoritarian triumphalism. It remains to be seen how the TNA will fair as a political actor seeking a resolution of an asymmetric conflict in which it has to bargain with an extremely powerful government that stifled the work of its own All Party Representative Committee (APRC) on the NQ. I was a signatory to a published letter that welcomed the APRC's majority report, but the whole APRC process turned out to be a sham. In a fundamental sense, however, the onus is on the government to convince the Tamil people that the trust they have placed in the representative parliamentary democratic path chosen by the TNA and other Tamil parties



to find solutions to their collective grievances through negotiations was not ill-judged. Therein lies the decisive link between the resolution of the NQ and the pacification, reunification and democratisation of the country as a whole.

Some commentators have suggested that the President and his UPPA government have an unprecedented opportunity to solve the 'ethnic conflict' once and for all. Indeed they are telling the President that the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections have placed him in a unique position and that he should seize the historic moment. They are telling the government and the Sinhalese people that the Tamil people in the North and East have rejected secessionism and voted for the moderate TNA, which stands for a negotiated solution within a united Lanka. But they should not let their good intentions obscure their view of the hard reality of rising authoritarianism and centralisation. Moreover, a political solution to the NQ was not on the short agenda of the UPPA's campaign at the presidential or parliamentary elections. In fact, the main planks of the campaign platform were the government's total military victory over the LTTE in May 2009 (actually a display of euphoric triumphalism) and promises of post-war development and prosperity. Now, the question is not if the government has the power but if it has the will to deliver a political solution and honour it.

### 'Post-war development'?

As already noted, development and political solution have to be seen as integrally linked in post-war Sri Lanka, but apparently the government is trying to use 'development' as a substitute for a political solution while justifying the continuation of militarization in the name of state security and sovereignty. The modalities of post-war development in the East and North have so far failed to inspire any hope of a political solution. On the contrary, the securitisation of post-war development makes it a continuation of war by other means. It is not my point that resettlement and rehabilitation or private investment should be postponed until a political solution is found, but that these and other related activities need to be framed and conducted in such ways that they are seen as steps towards linking development with a political solution rather than using it to sidestep the latter. In fact, the continuation of militarization and the poor developmental capacities of state institutions do not make the North and East attractive to private investors. Seminars and public relations tamashas to attract investors cannot help when the ground conditions are not conducive to livelihood revival and development.

In the wake of the Sri Lankan armed forces' total military victory over the LTTE, the government announced that the North and East needed 'post-war reconstruction and development' and a 'Presidential Task Force on Northern Development' (PTF) chaired by Mr Basil Rajapakse was appointed in May 2009. The PTF consisted of 19 members of whom five were top-ranking military officers including the commanders of the army, navy and air force. In addition, the secretary of Defence and the Inspector General of Police were members too. The others included the secretary to the president, secretaries of relevant ministries and the Commissioner of Essential Services. The composition of the PTF reflected not only the militarised nature of the so called post war development of the North but also the Colombo-centred centralist approach. There was not a single member representing the war-torn northern communities. With such an approach, how could a government win the trust and confidence of the people? The results of the April parliamentary elections in the North and East clearly show that the majority of Tamil voters who exercised their franchise did not have any confidence in the government. The government's highly publicised 'post-war development' programmes had failed to win their hearts and minds, and the fact that the TNA emerged as the main Tamil party against many odds is a powerful reminder to the government and the world at large that the Tamils of the North and East yearn for a democratic solution to the NQ. This alone should be a valid reason for the government to rethink its approach. There is no question that the state has a key role to play in post-war development but the current militarised and centralised approach is totally flawed and counterproductive.

The Lankan state is circumscribed by several other factors as well in playing the role it should. Dependence on foreign aid/grants largely due to the limited state revenue available for public investment, lack of capacity to absorb and effectively utilise aid/grants, excessive politicization and centralization of development agencies, and corruption are among the many shortcomings. These weaknesses of the state are often mentioned as good reasons to let the private sector lead post-war development. Of course, development in the present world means capitalist development and it cannot happen without the private sector and markets. However, the state has always been a key player in all cases of successful capitalist development, including post-war development. This has been well documented and conclusively shown by many scholars. In a post-war situation, such as the one in Sri Lanka, certain priorities of development, which are directly and indirectly related to the political solution, reunification and reconciliation cannot be left to the realm of



markets and private profit. There are far-sighted political choices to be made between economic efficiency and the priorities of strengthening peace-development linkages, and between the short-term profit-driven interests of investors on the one hand and the long-term needs of human capability expansion, social advancement of larger populations, peacebuilding from below, and ecological sustainability on the other. While the translation of these priorities into policies is a political task, their implementation depends on the nature and capacities of the state, and hence the need for appropriate state reforms and professional capacity building.

Post-war development and other related issues cannot be addressed in isolation from the larger political economy of neoliberalism, inequality, exclusion and repression in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has the longest history of economic liberalization in South Asia. We have more than three decades of experience with the neoliberal paradigm of development, almost the same length of time as our experience with war. Indeed liberalization of the economy and militarization of the NQ were going on simultaneously although each had its own distinct causal chain. If the former represented a discontinuity with past economic policies, the latter represented the continuation of an ongoing conflict by military means. While the coexistence of the two was yet another evidence against the liberal peace thesis (revived in the post-cold war era) that liberalised economies promote domestic and international peace, the war brought the state back into the economy in a significant way and thereby created contradictions with the neoliberal prescription of slimming the public sector and cutting back on state expenditure. However, the expanding war economy (driven by both the Lankan state and LTTE, and joined by various agencies engaged in wartime relief and services) became a source of accumulation for some and of employment for many poor rural youth. Both liberalisation and militarisation promoted Sri Lanka's globalization in a variety of ways. I shall not digress into this aspect in this article.

The North and East became the war zone while the open economy policy was being implemented in the rest of the country, even though the war could not be confined to the war zone. The results of the neoliberal economic policy turned out to be mixed, as expected. There was growth and accumulation, and structural change in the sectoral composition of GDP, with the service sector in the lead. Recently, Sri Lanka was upgraded to a low middle income country. However, the development process has been spatially and socially uneven. About 50% of GDP was being generated in the Western Province, and many regions became

marginalised with Moneragala District drawing the attention of critical observers as a classic example of exclusion due to uneven development. Indeed the experience exposed the well-known and predictable distributional consequences of uneven development accentuated by a neoliberal regime. The implementation of the economic policy was also accompanied by a host of repressive measures against the working class and trade unions. The process of uneven development and its consequences continue irrespective of governmental changes, vote-catching populist palliatives and the 'equitable development' promised in *Mahinda Chintana*. Now, when the same policy is extended to the war-ravaged, tsunami-devastated, and still militarised North and East, the consequences could be far more serious. So, the need of the hour is not only a political solution to the NQ but also a better development process for the country as a whole.

### **Sovereignty and political solution**

If 'winning the peace' is the catchphrase of well-intentioned peace activists, 'sovereignty' is the catchword of the defenders of militarization of the North and East even after the end of the war. Militarization is inevitable when a war is going on and the Lankan state was at war with the LTTE to regain lost territory and assert its territorial sovereignty over the entire island, as well as its monopoly on violence. However, the continuation of militarisation and high security zones (which were created by expelling thousands of families from their homes and lands), one year after the end of the war shows that state security (i.e. protection of the state) continues to take precedence over human security and livelihood revival. Sovereignty is not just about territory, alone but also about the security, wellbeing and dignity of the people inhabiting it – i.e. sovereignty of life. The longer a state relies on its military might (i.e. on its monopoly of violence) to govern a territory even after fully eliminating the military threat to its rule, the greater is its loss of legitimacy among the people. Progressive demilitarisation is a necessary condition for internal pacification and legitimization of the state in a post-civil war society. This is not happening in the North and East. The people remain disenfranchised to varying degrees due to being displaced and subjected to military rule. In these circumstances, the invocation of sovereignty *ad nauseum* by Sinhala nationalists makes no sense to the war-torn people.

The most reasonable and sustainable way to end any future threat to sovereignty is to implement a political solution that makes the Tamil people feel that they are not discriminated against because of their ethnicity. Sri Lanka's protracted



turmoil is history's punishment for the failure of the successive ruling blocs and their allies to envision and lead a grand progressive process of pluralist and inclusive nation building. It is time the present political class and the country

as a whole learn the bitter lessons of this monumental failure and realized the urgency of the need to leave the past behind and move forward. ■

The writer is Professor of Development Studies and Head of Research, Department of International Environment & Development Studies, Norwegian University of Life Sciences.

*Available Soon from the SSA*

**LOCATIONS OF BUDDHISM  
COLONIALISM AND MODERNITY IN SRI LANKA**

by

**Anne M. Blackburn**

Modernizing and colonizing forces brought nineteenth-century Sri Lankan Buddhists both challenges and opportunities. How did Buddhists deal with social and economic change; new forms of political, religious, and educational discourse; and Christianity? And how did Sri Lankan Buddhists, collaborating with other Asian Buddhists, respond to colonial rule? To answer these questions, Anne M. Blackburn focuses on the life of leading monk and educator Hikkaduwe Sumangala (1827–1911) to examine more broadly Buddhist life under foreign rule.

In *Locations of Buddhism*, Blackburn reveals that during Sri Lanka's crucial decades of deepening colonial control and modernization, there was a surprising stability in the central religious activities of Hikkaduwe and the Buddhists among whom he worked. At the same time, they developed new institutions and forms of association, drawing on precolonial intellectual heritage as well as colonial-period technologies and discourse. Advocating a new way of studying the impact of colonialism on colonized societies, Blackburn is particularly attuned here to human experience, paying attention to the habits of thought and modes of affiliation that characterized individuals and smaller-scale groups. *Locations of Buddhism* is a wholly original contribution to the study of Sri Lanka and the history of Buddhism more generally.

**Anne M. Blackburn** is associate professor of South Asian and Buddhist studies at Cornell University and the author of *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture*.



# SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION: DISTURBING REALITIES OF SRI LANKA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Pradeep Peiris

The general election held on 8 April 2010 was the sixth parliamentary election to be held under the proportional representation (PR) system introduced by the 1978 constitution. Its results provide very useful insights into the ways in which the Sri Lankan electorate behaves, which in turn also enables us to assess the health of our democracy. In this brief essay, I discuss three aspects of the 2010 election, namely: (i) success of UNP defectors, (ii) appeal of celebrities over party stalwarts, and (iii) success of Sinhala nationalists when they contest with a winning coalition.

Although the above-mentioned aspects have been usually present in our electoral process for quite some time, they have continued to be absent in any serious political analysis. This parallels the fact that since the introduction of the 1978

constitution, no comprehensive analysis has been made on how the new electoral system has shaped the nature of parties and party systems, and how it has impacted on the behaviour of politicians as well as the strategies of voters. In this paper, I will provide readers a descriptive account on these three intriguing aspects along with possible explanations for them. Of course, my explanations are no more than tentative hypotheses warranting further research.

In the following discussion, I will first present the case of UNP defectors. Then, I will discuss the performance of two celebrities in this election. Finally, I will focus on the performance of the Sinhala nationalist JHU and JVP parties while in and out of coalitions with the UPFA at different points of time.

**Table 1: Preferential Votes Obtained in 2004 & 2010**

A. MPs who crossed over to the UPFA	B.	C. Total UPFA voter gain by district	Preferential votes	
			D. 2004 (UNP)	E. 2010 (UPFA)
1. Bandula Gunawardena	Colombo		57,460	64,654
2. Gamini Lokuge			53,810	49,750
3. Milinda Moragoda*		66,208	99,146	24,296
4. Rohitha Bogollagama*	Kalutara		44,216	45,605
5. Rajitha Senarathne		22,628	97,001	66,710
6. Mahinda Samarasinghe			93,758	97,778
7. Susantha Punchinilame	Trincomalee	28,731	96,591	22,820
8. Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena	Matara	54,920	66,498	67,510
9. S.B. Dissanayake	Kandy	71,688	71,723	108,169
10. Keheliya Rambukwelle			110,720	133,060
11. Lalith Niyomal Perera	Puttalam	24,985	45,150	32,781
12. Johnston Fernando	Kurunegala	54,920	112,601	136,943
13. P. Dayaratne	Digamadulla	71,688	31,215	32,915
14. Nissanka Manoda Wijeratne*	Kegalle	24,985	44,271	28,881
15. Mahinda Rathnathilaka*	Ratnapura	43,877	36,289	23,796

\* Milinda Moragoda, Rohitha Bogollagama, Manoda (Mano) Wijeratne and Mahinda Rathnathilaka failed to secure their seats, while all others who crossed over to the government not only were reelected but most performed better than many longstanding UPFA MPs.



## Tale of UNP defectors

The 2010 electoral success of the former UNP crossover MPs is quite fascinating and deserves political analysis. Except for four candidates, the rest of the crossover MPs (who joined the Rajapakse government in 2007) managed to secure their parliamentary seats even while contesting under the once-rival UPFA coalition, led by the SLFP. They did not only secure their seats but most of them also recorded a resounding measure of electoral success by receiving the highest preferential votes. For example, Johnston Fernando, who had been a strong UNP MP until he crossed over to the UPFA just a few months before the general election, obtained the highest preferential votes from the Kurunegala district. The electoral performance of Susantha Punchinilame, minister of Nation Building, was also quite spectacular. After leaving the UNP and joining the UPFA government in 2007, in the April parliamentary election he not only topped the UPFA preferential votes, but did so even after changing from his home electorate. Until he crossed over to the UPFA, Punchinilame had been a strong UNP politician who belonged to a traditionally UNP political family in Ratnapura District. What surprises the observer is that Punchinilame topped the UPFA list in the multiethnic Trincomalee district where he launched his political campaign only recently.

Table 1 shows the electoral performance of the UNP's defectors in the parliamentary elections held in 2004 and in 2010. Columns D and E give the total number of votes received by each candidate in the 2004 and 2010 elections. Columns B and C indicate the district from which each candidate contested the 2010 election and the total vote gain that the UPFA achieved as compared to the 2004 election in each respective district.

Apart from the above-mentioned four who lost their seats, the rest managed to be successfully reelected on the UPFA ticket. Without serious inquiry we would not be able to understand the determinants of the electoral success of these defectors. When they contested the parliamentary election of 2010, these candidates exhibited some common characteristics (perhaps the secrets of their success). They generally enjoyed the confidence of the president, which they may have earned on various grounds. They all played a prominent political role during the military campaign against the LTTE and/or during the election campaign against Rajapakse's main contender, General Sarath Fonseka. They

used their ministerial portfolios to strengthen and maintain their vote bases using clientelistic goods. Most of them built up their political image as 'strong and able leaders' in their districts and carried out efficient election campaigns backed by plentiful material resources. Even though most of the UNP defectors left their old party as a team, while in the UPFA government they maintained individual loyalty to the president, rather than to the UPFA coalition or their own team of defectors. For example, most of the defectors claimed they joined the president to support the government's war against the LTTE or the president's endeavours in establishing good governance. "Strengthening President Rajapakse's hand" is the key phrase all of them used in explaining their goal.

It is obvious that this group was a vital strength to the president in the last parliament. Without their support, the UPFA government could have succumbed to the pressures mounted by the UNP and the JVP. Nevertheless, it is interesting to examine how much their presence contributed towards the UPFA's spectacular election victory. Have they too contributed to strengthen the UPFA vote bank through their preferential votes? The above table could assist us to find the answers.

Column C shows the total number of votes that the UPFA received this time as compared to 2004. As Table 1 depicts, the UPFA received more votes than those in 2004 in every district concerned. Nevertheless, the total votes gained by the UPFA were far less than the preferential votes that UNP defectors received in these districts. This suggests that the traditional UPFA supporters, too, have placed their trust in the recent crossovers (despite their arriving from the opposition camp), rather than trusting the known UPFA incumbents in their respective districts. This shows that, despite the efforts of traditional UPFA leaders to convince their electorate to cast only a single preferential vote (*thani manape*) without giving preference votes to the 'outsiders' (ones who joined recently), the UNP defectors succeeded in amassing higher percentages of preferential votes. Of course, they may have instigated some voter influx from the UNP, but certainly that voter shift is not significant when compared to the volume of preferential votes they received. This somewhat confirms the survey findings that, in the wake of 18 UNP MPs crossing over to the government ranks in 2007, 50% of the SLFP supporters approved of the crossovers while only 30% denounced them (Peiris and Ranasinghe 2007).



## 'Celebrity-craving' electorates

The second observation I discuss is the remarkable electoral success of two celebrities in the 2010 election. Electoral appeal of such celebrities is not a new phenomenon in our politics and is also observable across the world. Successful Hollywood star Ronald Reagan was elected as the president of the United States in 1980. Former President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines was also a popular actor before he began his political career. A number of examples can also be drawn from our neighbour India, with popular cricketers making successful bids to parliament (*Lok Sabha*). Therefore, it is quite understandable that candidates' personal fame can contribute to electoral success. However, what is quite difficult to understand is how 'celebrity status' can become the sole qualification to be elected to parliament, even getting some candidates more votes than career politicians serving in a particular constituency for decades.

In the recent provincial council elections, parties put forward celebrities to attract more votes, and most of those individuals exhibited great success. The success of celebrities at the provincial council elections did not surprise political analysts, as usually the contest at the provincial level is largely left to the second-tier leadership of the parties. However, the 2010 parliamentary election confirmed that celebrities can succeed not only at the less-powerful provincial council elections but also in the general elections where national legislators are chosen. In Matara District, the cricket legend Sanath Jayasuriya, despite being fully engaged in his sports career, topped the UPFA's preferential list. As shown in Table 2, Jayasuriya received more preferential votes than even the UPFA district leader and veteran politician, Minister Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena. Jayasuriya achieved this feat while spending considerable time away from the campaign to take part in the Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket tournament. His cricketing schedule was so busy that he could not even cast his vote on election day, and the Election Commissioner had to organize a special voting facility for him on a prior date. Yet in the end, Matara District voters preferred him over the party district leader.

Similarly, Upeksha Swarnamali, actress in the popular teledrama *Paba* who is in her early 20s and without any identifiable political background, came second in the UNF preferential list in the Gampaha District. Even though she came into the political limelight only three months before the parliamentary election by extending her support for defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka, she received more votes than the UNP's deputy leader and veteran

politician, Karu Jayasuriya. These are only two examples, but the election results indicate the success of many candidates who are celebrities, having earned their fame in various vocations other than in a political career in any particular electorate. Of course, it should be noted that there are at least two 'perceived' celebrities – Geetha Kumarasinghe and Susanthika Jayasinghe – who failed to secure a parliamentary seat.

Table 2: Preferential Votes Obtained by Two Celebrities

UPFA Matara preferential votes		UNF Gampaha preferential votes	
Sanath Jayasuriya	74,352	Upeksha Swarnamali	81,350
Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena	70,439	Karu Jayasuriya	60,310

In addition to the above two candidates, many other individuals possessing celebrity status due to various reasons also performed well in this election. It was a common factor for most of them that they did not have an identifiable voter base, developed either on the basis of social cleavages, political ideologies or clientalism. Most of them did not even advocate any particular policy stand other than of extending their loyalty to the party and party leadership. Those celebrities who contested from the ruling UPFA implied that they would be able to deliver various patronage benefits if they were elected. The main message of Jayasuriya's election campaign was that he entered politics on the president's invitation, implying his close personal association to the president. (*Daily News*, 5 March 2010).

## Winning formula for Sinhala nationalists

Even though the total JHU seats has been reduced to three in this parliament, two elected candidates received a huge number of preferential votes at the 2010 election. The JVP, after it had contested the 2004 parliamentary election under the UPFA coalition and won 40 seats, in the 2010 election was reduced to 7 seats while contesting with the DNA. However, what is of great interest is the performance of individual politicians in these two elections. The JVP heavyweights, who topped the Anuradhapura, Matale and Kurunegala districts at the 2004 election, could not even secure their seats in the 2010 election after they left the ruling UPFA coalition. Those who managed to get reelected to the 2010 parliament from the JVP received substantially lower numbers of preferential votes than they got in the 2004 election (Table 3). In contrast, despite limiting their presence in the parliament to just three MPs, JHU candidates like Champika Ranawaka (from Colombo District) and Ven.



Athuraliye Rathana (from Gampaha district) scored high preferential votes as a part of the ruling coalition. Ranawaka came second in the Colombo District preferential vote list. Ven. Rathana received almost ten times what he got in the 2004 election from Kalutara. It should be recalled that the JHU contested independently as a party in the 2004 election.

**Table 3: Preferential Votes for JHU & JVP Candidates in 2004 & 2010**

JHU & JVP Candidates	General Election 2004	General Election 2010
Ven. Athuraliye Rathana	10,772	112,010
Champika Ranawaka	-(rational list?)	120,333
Vijitha Herath	215,540	50,967
Surii Handunneethi	152,942	78,126
Ajith Kumara	128,000	15,872

Interestingly, both the JVP and JHU exhibited much similarity in terms of their national policies and ideology. They both advocated a military solution to the country's ethnic problem and served as the main propaganda machines to the local audience in support of the military campaign. Therefore, both parties appealed to the same – Sinhala Buddhist nationalist – constituency, which is largely the vote bank of the current UPFA coalition. As shown in Table 3, these Sinhala nationalist politicians (JVP or JHU) enjoyed heavy popularity in the elections due to the fact that they contested with the UPFA coalition.

### Tentative explanations

I strongly believe that the above phenomena are direct consequences of the PR electoral system, introduced by the late President J.R. Jayewardene in his 1978 constitution. According to this PR system, 196 MPs of the total of 225 seats are to be elected for the 196 electorates. The rest of the 29 MPs are chosen from the nationalist lists put forward by each party, based on the vote share each party commands. Unlike in the previous first-past-the-post system, candidates have to contest at the district level instead of comparatively smaller parliamentary electorates. Of course, this also increases the opportunity for smaller parties to get elected to parliament as long as they have achieved the 5% threshold. However, this system demands contestants to compete in a larger geographic area; hence, it requires more substantial levels of individual spending capacity to contest an election. Since candidates are not nominated on the basis of

electorates, they have the liberty to collect votes from all over the district as long as they have the resources to do so.

Perhaps the most problematic feature of the PR system is the ability to cast a maximum of three preferential votes for three candidates. This allows voters to cast two votes for two other candidates, in addition to their main candidate. In this context, it is reasonable to assume that voters would cast their first preferential vote for the candidate who they feel closest to, usually being the one representing their constituency (*ape gamme manthri*), maintaining a longstanding relationship either by representing their interests or by demonstrating patronage benefits. However, since voters can cast two more votes for two other candidates of the same party, for these they might not use as strong criteria as when selecting their first preference. Politicians are well aware of this phenomenon, and, therefore, most of the candidates focus on these two additional votes, rather than first choice, when engineering their election campaigns. It is comparatively easier to persuade voters to cast one of those two extra preferential votes for a particular candidate, than asking for voters' first preferential vote. In this context, candidates see no strong incentives to work for a particular electorate or to represent a particular community or ideology. Hence, interaction between the party, the candidate and the voter has declined, and whatever interaction remains is largely limited only to election time. This trend of declining interaction and representation of party candidates makes the voter's electoral choice much more difficult, as the average voter becomes confused about who actually represents their ideology, interests and needs in parliament. Therefore, this dialectical relationship between the behaviour of the candidate and the voter widens the opportunities for the political 'Mega Stars' who can afford multimillion campaign budgets or the celebrities who often make voting choice much easier for less-educated electorates. In addition, when voters feel ignorant about the choices available to them and find the necessary information to make rational choices is too costly, as Anthony Downs argues in his rational choice theory, they use ideology to make their voting decisions (Downs 1957). This explains to a great extent why the 'ideology-masters' of the two Sinhala nationalist parties, the JVP and the JHU, received more popular votes when they contested as UPFA coalition partners.

In addition to the effects of the electoral system, the parties have also changed and are no longer what they used to be. It is becoming more and more difficult for the voter to place any party in the axes of left-right, liberal-conservative, or any other. For example, the ideology and policy stances of



the UNP under President Premadasa and the present leader Ranil Wickremesinghe are not quite the same. Similarly, the SLFP and the UPFA coalition, respectively under President Kumaratunga and President Rajapakse, are also very different in terms of policy and ideological positions. Even the JVP sent mixed signals to its voters by agreeing to support the socialist-nationalist UPFA coalition in 2004, and then becoming an active partner with the capitalist-liberal UNP in 2010 in their bid to support the common presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka. Therefore, the behaviour of these parties must have confused voters about the policy and ideological stance of the parties. Perhaps this also explains why politicians were able to cross between parties and still be successful. This has also made it possible for celebrities, who do not stand for a particular policy or ideology, to win more votes than traditional politicians.

### What do these observations tell us?

These observations provide valuable insights into the country's political culture. More importantly they highlight the deficits of the current political party system in Sri Lanka. These observations raise many questions about the nature of our representative democracy. Who are the constituents that these MPs are representing? And, what will they do to represent them? Do these indicate the changing character of the social bases of Sri Lankan political parties?

If one examines the features of the election campaign of the candidates who performed exceptionally well, most spent exorbitant amounts of funds for their election campaigns. Most of them succeeded in communicating to the potential voter the message that they possess enormous wealth and authority, and are capable of delivering clientelistic goods if elected. These candidates rented hundreds of luxury vehicles and used various state-of-the-art advertising techniques to impress their electorates by branding their images as trustworthy philanthropists. As shown in the Table 1, these politicians proved that their techniques were more effective than those who were exclusively dependent on the traditional methods of voter allegiance, such as based on 'social cleavages' and 'patron-client networks.'

Scholars of Sri Lankan electoral politics (Wilson 1975, Jupp 1978, Jiggins 1979) have observed the role of social cleavages, such as class, caste, ethnicity, religion and ideological differences in the community, in amassing votes by the parties and politicians, as described in the voter allegiance model of Lipset and Rokkan (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Similar literature, particularly Dilesh Jayanntha's

scholarly work *Electoral Allegiance in Sri Lanka* (Jayanntha 1992), indicates the use of patron-client networks by parties and politicians to maintain their voter bases in their electorates. In the developing world it is quite common for parties and politicians to use public office to provide individual goods (jobs, promotions, job transfers, welfare schemes) or club goods (roads, schools or electricity) to potential voters, expecting their votes in return (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2005). I believe, in the social cleavage model, parties represent the interests of their electorate; while in the patron-client model, they attempt to make some sort of representation on the material needs of their voter base.

However, what we observed in the 2010 election was that politicians do not need to be effective representatives of their communities to be elected to parliament. These three observations further indicate that politicians can afford to appear to be for conflicting ideologies or opposing policies, against what they stood for in the past. Therefore, politicians can change their parties and still be quite able to win elections. They may not receive the votes of the same voters, but still there are enough votes available as long as they have the resources to amass them. Hence, unless parties take initiatives to change themselves by accommodating to these realities, their role will continue to shrink – as Diamond and Gunther (2000) argue, political parties are declining across the world.

Calvin Woodward, in his pioneering work *The Growth of a Party System in Ceylon* (Woodward 1969), observed the transformation of Sri Lankan politics from "politics of notables" to "parties of notables" during the early years of post-independence Sri Lanka. In light of this, one can argue that the observations that I have made on the 2010 election suggest that presently political parties are in somewhat of a reverse swing. That is to say, the organizational capacity of the parties is largely dependent on the capacity of their candidates. Perhaps, it may be too early to make any generalizations by analyzing one election and three observations; nevertheless, these observations I have presented in this paper surely confirm the agency of the politician in forming voter allegiance.

E.E. Schattschneider (1942), in his seminal work *Party Government*, claimed that democracy is "unthinkable" without parties. Similarly, there are many other contemporary scholarly works (e.g., Corrales 2000, Mainwaring and Scully 1995, Mainwaring 1999) that argue that parties remain critical to the achievement of democracy. Hence, the currently emerging phenomena of individual-centric politics and



weakening party-based politics need to be studied carefully, in order to strengthen the country's political party system. For the parties to stand stronger, they also have to realize the need to change themselves, not only by altering their ideological and policy positions, but also perhaps by even including celebrities in their ranks.

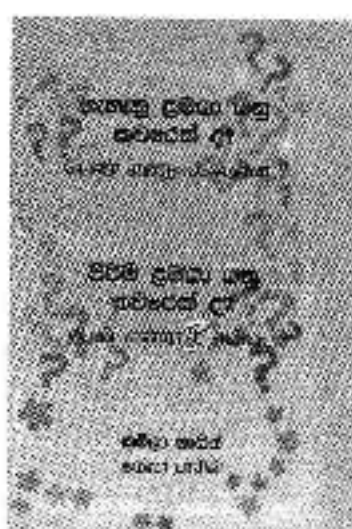
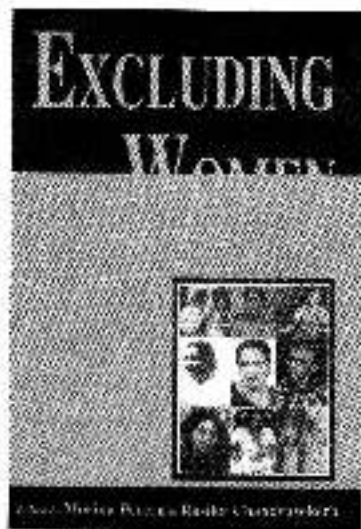
Finally, I would like to remind readers that this paper only seeks to provide some tentative explanations for its observations. These informal interpretations need to be tested using scientific research, before accepting any as conclusions. In addition, this article is meant to highlight the lacunae in Sri Lankan electoral analysis under the PR system.

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Pradeep Peiris heads Social Indicator, a social research group in Colombo.



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# RECONFIGURING PATRONAGE POLITICS IN MINORITY PARTIES

Minna Thaheer

The general elections held in April 2010 was significant for a number of reasons. This was the first parliamentary election held after the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. It was also the first occasion since 1989 that a general election could be held throughout the island, particularly in the Northern and Eastern provinces, free of LTTE violence. Both Tamil and Muslim political parties, which had earlier been subject to the LTTE's coercive pressures, were able to campaign and mobilize without those constraints in the April parliamentary election. Similarly, the future of Tamil nationalist politics in post-LTTE Sri Lanka was also a theme of considerable interest.

The presidential election of January and the parliamentary elections in April show the new tendencies in which Sri Lanka's recent political changes have occurred. Of special interest is how the ethnic minority parties have fared and what tendencies their electoral performance indicate. This essay's focus is on such tendencies discernible especially among Muslim voters at a national, regional and local constituency level.

As a preliminary point, one can observe that the system of proportional representation (PR) worked in a dual way in the parliamentary elections of the recent past. When President J.R. Jayewardene introduced the PR system in 1978 one of his intentions was to weaken the small parties and perpetuate the power of the two main parties in favour of the party that polls the highest number of votes, which at the time was the United National Party (UNP). However, with the lowering of the cut-off point from 12.5% to 5.0% in 1988, smaller parties have been enjoying a greater salience in the parliamentary process. The elections in 1989, 1994, 2000, 2001, 2004 and 2010 showed that the support of minority parties had become indispensable for the survival of the major parties.

A noteworthy trend in the April parliamentary election is the change that occurred in the nature of the performance of Muslim minority political parties and regional parties. The identity of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) to a large extent used to be subsumed under the UNP, since the SLMC

candidates contested under the UNP's Elephant symbol and as UNP candidates. The National Congress (NC), All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC) and the defunct National Unity Alliance (NUA) candidates contested under the UPFA/SLFP banner. The minority parties helped boost the vote banks of the majority parties.

The United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), United National Front (UNF), Democratic National Alliance (DNA) and the Ilankai Thamizh Arasu Katchi (ITAK) contesting the April elections are more characteristic of interparty coalitions, rather than political parties in the conventional sense.

The increased number of Muslim MPs in the opposition shows a reconfiguration of patronage politics in the minority polity that seems to have moved away from the conventional patronage culture of voting for development-based issues. (for definition of terms, see last part of article)[/or put the highlighted definitions on p7 in text box near here?]

## **Muslim parties and their performance**

The electoral performance of the Muslim parties can be analyzed at three levels: national, regional and district (a specific electoral division).

### *National-level performance*

In the absence of LTTE pressures, both Tamil and Muslim candidates from the North and East were free to make their political choices and alignments. Many of them joined the two main coalitions, the UPFA and UNF, as well as minority parties such as ITAK/TNA and SLMC. This was a phenomenon prevalent in this year's elections.

The ethnic divide of the North and the East from the rest of the country is striking at very first glance at the election results. Outside the Northern and Eastern provinces, except for the SLMC (leader Rauf Hakeem won a seat in Kandy, as did national list MP M.S.M.A. Aslam in Beruwala), the Muslim parties, the NC and ACMC, as in the case of the TNA, stuck to areas where their bases were strong.



In regions where minority communities with high aspirations and self-determination goals are prevalent, there is a tendency for a number of minority political parties to emerge, as was seen in the number of parties that contested this election, especially in the Eastern Province.

According to Giovanni Sartori's hypothesis, politics where there is a:

... dispersion of the incoercible minorities (if any), impure PR formulas are likely to allow for one or two parties above the two party format, that is, three-four parties. This format will, in turn, engender the mechanics of moderate multipartism if and only if the polity does not display high polarization. However, since moderate multipartism still is bipolar converging (competitive competition), it will not tend to increase systematic polarization. (Sartori 2001: 94)

Sartori says polarized societies not practicing the positive features of the PR system to the fullest will lead to the creation of a number of minority parties. This will facilitate moderate multipartism as long as there is no high polarization. Sartori also believes, however, since moderate multipartism tends to strengthen main parties, this in turn will increase polarization in communities.

The results of the Northern and Eastern provinces would reinforce Sartori's point. In an ethnically determined way, the North and the East have clearly gone to the minority parties, and the rest of the country to the Sinhala majority parties. However, the Muslim minority parties seem to be strengthening the two-party competition at the central level.

The perception that Muslims did not vote for the UPFA during the presidential election is to some extent negated in the parliamentary election. There was a marginal swing towards the UPFA, along with a wide scattering of Muslim votes in the preferential votes, especially in electorates such as Colombo Central, Colombo North, Colombo East, and Borella.

This is also the first time since the introduction of the PR system that not a single Muslim candidate has won under the UNP/UNF ticket in the Colombo District.

This indicates that there has been a shift in the Muslim voter base towards the UPFA. The perception seems to be that the candidates fielded in Colombo district by the UNP were weak, and therefore choosing a 'strong' Muslim candidate from the three in the list (A.J.M. Muzammil, M. Maharooof and Shafack Rajabdeen) was not possible, is one explanation given by voters. This also resulted in the Muslim vote being

scattered. Out of the three preferences, it is also a general practice to vote for the party leader and the other two from different ethnic or interest groups, gender, etc. This perhaps made it difficult for the Muslim voter to vote for more than one Muslim candidate. There was also a shift in Muslim votes toward the UPFA's Muslim as well as non-Muslim candidates. A combination of such reasons adversely seems to have affected the ability of any Muslim candidates from the UNP to secure a winning number of votes. Under the UPFA ticket, Minister A.H.M. Fowzie was the only Muslim candidate to win in Colombo.

The Muslims also lost their traditional representation in the Bernwala electorate in Kalutara District. This has led to a Muslim grievance that there is no Muslim parliamentary representation south of Colombo, either in the government or the opposition.

Muslim voters in Kandy and Kegalle seem to have voted with a common resolve to return all Muslim incumbents. They elected Abdul Cader, SLMC Leader Rauf Hakeem (who contested under the UNP ticket), A.H.A. Halim in Kandy and Kabir Hashim in Kegalle, notably from the opposition UNF. However, this 'consensus' was not seen in the districts where many Muslim candidates polled in big numbers, such as in Colombo.

The strategy of the Muslim candidates of the UPFA was to erode the UNP's Muslim votes as much as possible. They were quite successful in this, but in the process also lost their own seats. For example, Azad Sully's preferential votes (14,931), which he claimed would Muslim votes away from the UNP and helped boost UPFA votes, failed to get him a seat in the government benches.

As mentioned earlier, the Muslim UNP candidates in Colombo lost owing to a combination of reasons, such as the candidates fielded by the UNP being perceived as too weak by voters and the candidates' own strategy of requesting their constituencies to vote only for them (one out of the three preferences). Political commentators in the Tamil press have noted this to be a reason for the UNP candidates' losses in the Eastern Province as well. Also, other factors, such as too many Muslim candidates in one electorate and voters not knowing what policies the Muslim candidates represented, contributed to zero representation of Muslim MPs from Colombo on the UNF ticket.

In terms of the final tally of parliamentary seats, Muslim voters appear to have preferred the opposition to the ruling UPFA.



Of the 18 Muslim members returned to parliament, 11 are from the opposition, that is, from the SLMC and UNP components of the UNF. Thus, at the national level, one sees that in regions where ethnic cleavages and tensions continued to prevail, voters' choices seem to have been shaped by rights-based issues rather than development-based goals (such as voting for a winning party).

The fact that there are altogether 18 Muslim MPs in parliament is no mean achievement for the Muslim community. However, it is at the level of the Cabinet of ministers that Muslim representation has suffered. Compared to the 15 Muslim ministers in the previous cabinet, there are now just 5 Muslim ministers.

### *Regional-level performance*

In the Northern and Eastern regions, Tamil and Muslim candidates have contested under ethnic as well as mainstream parties. However, Muslim voters have shown a preference for their ethnic-based parties over the main parties. Sartori's observation that, whenever there is high polarization in a polity the two-party mechanism tends to break down, is quite relevant to tendencies in Sri Lanka. However, since a two-party mechanism implies centripetal competition, it tends to lessen systemic polarization, as seen in Muslim representation in the South.

In the Eastern Province the three Muslim parties (NC, ACMC, and the former NUA led by Ms Ashraff who is now a member of the SLFP) contested under the ruling majority party's symbol and returned two MPs – A.L.M. Athaulla (NC) from Digamadulla and A.M. Hisbulla (ACMC) from Batticaloa. The SLMC, aligned with the opposition UNP in the UNF coalition, won 4 seats in the Eastern Province, returning Bazeercegu Dawood (Batticaloa), M.S. Tawfeek (Trincomalee), H. Mohamed Mohamed Hariz, and Mohamed Cassim Mohamed Faizal (Digamadulla). All the Muslim minority parties seemed to need majority party support to return candidates. The SLMC, in particular, successfully retained the seats it had earlier won in 2004 in the same districts. However, it did so this time in alliance with, and with the support of, the UNP. In contrast, in 2004 the SLMC won with the same number of candidates in the Eastern Province under its own symbol.

In a comparison of the two systems (a single-member district system that enhances 'personalized' politics, and a list PR system reinforcing 'party-based' or party-centred politics), Sartori says, majoritarian systems are assumed to lead to

constituency-based (local) politics and thus to decentralized parties. On the other hand, the PR system is assumed to favour centralized and stronger parties.

According to Sartori, the PR system has proven that, when there is a nationwide two-party system in place, a plurality system is a powerful factor in maintaining two partyism (Sartori: 102). This tendency has become evident in instances where minority parties have strengthened the majority parties' voter bases, as indicated in the UPFA victory in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Sartori also says that these seemingly obvious characteristics also have exceptions when one looks at the indirect or derivative effects.

Did the low voter turnout countrywide in the April parliamentary polls impact on minority representation? Low voter turnout obviously indicates that for all candidates there was a serious erosion of their vote banks. Only 55% voted in the entire country in the general election of 2010, an all-time low voter turnout. This affected the numbers polled by minority parties in the North and the East. In the previous parliament, there were 13 Muslim MPs from the North and the East. This time, the number has been reduced to 10.

### *District dynamics - Digamadulla*

The electoral district of Digamadulla (Ampara) represents a rather curious case. It is one of the largest electorates having a majority of Muslim votes. At the April parliamentary election, 660 candidates belonging to 18 registered political parties and 48 independent groups contested. In Digamadulla there were some interesting dynamics at play.

The UPFA and the UNP had to adopt special strategies in the North and East where Muslim parties had more leverage. This was quite different from areas like Colombo where the electorate was largely Sinhala and the Muslim voters did not have much leverage. For example, in the Eastern Province, where minority parties were strong, parties such as the SLMC had more freedom to select candidates with strong personal support bases, forcing the UNP to concede to their choices. Ultimately, Eastern Province Muslims managed to get five MPs, four elected and one from the national list.

However, there is also no doubt that in Digamadulla the Muslim vote base swayed towards the UPFA, although only one Muslim UPFA MP was elected out of five candidates. Despite their defeat, some of the Muslim stalwarts' preferential votes helped boost the UPFA votes. For example,



the former UPFA Minister Ferial Ashraff received 30,765, including Sinhalese votes of around 12,000, in the Digamadulla District. A.M.M. Naashaad, a former assistant secretary of the UNP and later a member of the SLMC, who contested under the UPFA this time, received 27,039, the highest-ever preferential vote in Sammanthurai for an SLFP candidate. M.L.A. Ameer's 22,208 and A. Abdul Basheer's 27,534 votes, and the winner A.L.A. Athaulah's 36,943 votes, as the highest in Akkaraipattu, also strengthened the UPFA's vote base. However, the fact that there were too many Muslim candidates fielded from the UPFA in Digamadulla caused the votes to be scattered, helping only one winner to emerge. In Batticaloa, too, the losing candidates' votes (former non-Cabinet Minister of Disaster Relief Services and Irrigation Ameer Ali's 16,246, Ali Zahir Moulana's 12,803 and winning candidate A.M. Hizbullah's 22,565 votes) helped boost the UPFA's vote banks in the East. The point then is that Muslim candidates with local vote banks helped the main parties to increase their overall share of votes in the Eastern Province.

One can also observe that the Muslim parties could not have won on their own without the help of their allied main parties, owing to their alliance strategies. For example, in Digamadulla, the SLMC's gains were possible due to its alliance with the UNP. Similarly, the ACMC's and NC's gains, too, were enabled by their alliances with the ruling UPFA.

### Patronage versus ideology

In 2004, the pressures from Eastern Province constituencies for Muslim parliamentarians to seek development-oriented goals, and thereby leave the opposition benches (of the SLMC) to join forces with the government, witnessed the crossover from the opposition to the government of three of the SLMC's national list MPs. The only exception was party General Secretary M. I. Hassan Ali. Such crossovers have also been linked to the imperatives of patronage politics. Joining the ruling party is a sure way to mobilize power and public resources to sustain patron-client links with the electorate.

The concept of "patronage democracy," which Kanchan Chandra (2004) employed in relation to communal politics in India, has features also relevant to Sri Lanka. Patronage democracy refers to "a democracy in which the state monopolises access to jobs services and other benefits, and in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state" (Chandra 2004: 6). The key feature

of this kind of democracy is "not simply the size of the state but the power of elected officials to distribute the vast resources controlled by the state to voters on an *individualised* basis, by exercising their discretion in the implementation of state policy" (ibid: 6). According to Chandra, this individualized distribution of resources, in conjunction with a dominant state, makes patronage democracies a distinct family of democracies with distinct types of voter and elite behaviour (ibid: 6). This type of patronage democracy can be applied to the Sri Lankan polity, and is evident in the dynamics of 'voter-elite' behaviour in the kind of democracy practised especially in the North and the East.

A political system as a whole, or a subsystem within it comprising specific administrative areas or particular sections of the population, may have features of 'patronage democracy.' There might also be the case that, "the relationship between these areas and/or sections of the population and the state would constitute a 'pocket' of patronage-democracy within a larger system that is not patronage based" (ibid).

Muslim voters this time, too, in the Eastern Province were keen in activating this 'patron-client' relationship for their region's benefit. They obviously sought to achieve development-oriented goals by boosting UPFA votes, knowing well that the UPFA would form the government. However, they succeeded only partially, since they could only ensure votes for the ruling party and not for Muslim candidates to win. Ironically, it was the opposition UNP that got the highest number of Muslim seats in the East.

The UPFA's two Muslim candidates' victory in the Vanni also gives credence to the 'patronage democracy' criteria, where recovery and development are paramount needs of the resettling Muslim polity, goals which they believed could be achieved only by voting in the candidates on the government's side, votes otherwise becoming votes lost. Former Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services Rishard Badindin (27,461) and Unais Farook (10,851) were returned from Vanni, where the UPFA won two seats. Despite this crying need, the SLMC also won a candidate there, Narddeen Mashur (9,518), which speaks for the 'rights' cause. Such results give the impression that Muslim voters in the Vanni voted more with 'development' needs in mind.

'Patronage based' or 'development-based' voting: refers to benefit-seeking voting, individuals and groups who vote for candidates/parties believed to have the best prospects for providing material advancement for their constituency.



These votes are especially attracted by candidates already in the government camp.

'Ideology-based' and 'rights-based' voting: refers to voting in favour of a party's expressed philosophy or ideology. These votes imply the expectation that these parties will espouse the rights of particular communities or ethnic groups. Such voting tendencies can be expected in polarized constituencies where ethnic grievances and cleavages are high. Voters believe that such parties can more effectively raise rights-based issues than those on the side of the government.

According to Anthony Downs (1957), ideologies help voters to focus attention when there are hardly any policy differences among parties. A voter can compare ideologies rather than policies.

The lack of information creates a demand for ideologies in the electorate. Since political parties are eager to seize any method of gaining votes available to them, they respond by creating a supply. Each party invests [in] an ideology in order to attract the votes of those citizens who wish to cut costs by voting ideologically. (Downs 1957: 142)

Once a party has marketed its ideology in a region, it cannot suddenly abandon or radically alter that ideology without convincing voters of its unreliability.

Downs further says that, not only parties' ideologies, but their characteristics also may be deduced from the premise that parties seek office solely for the returns, power and prestige that accompany it. And imperfect knowledge is the key to this. When citizens do not have the necessary information nor the time to compare and contrast party policies with one another, then voters find ideology useful because "the political actors make enough 'product differentiation' to make their output distinguishable from that of the rivals" (ibid: 142). Political ideologies help to focus attention on the differences between parties; therefore they can be used as samples of "differentiating stands" in voting for a markedly outstanding ideology (ibid). The SLMC's increasing tendency to promote its image of being a party based on a political ideology has helped strengthen its vote base.

## Conclusion

At a regional- and district-specific level, this is the first time that the UPFA/SLFP has got the highest number of votes from Muslims of the North and East since the SLMC left its coalition with SLFP-based parties. The SLMC had always had remarkable victories when it was in the

government camp. Despite the SLMC's departure from the UPFA, the UPFA still had its vote base boosted with Muslim votes, through the help of the smaller splinter groups of the SLMC, i.e., the NC, APMC and the now defunct NUA. This is evident in the fact that Muslim candidates with local vote banks have helped the main parties to increase their overall share of votes in the Eastern Province and the rest of the island.

The dual role of the PR system, where minority parties strengthen major parties (with the leverage of being tied to a larger party) contrary to its conventional conception that major parties weaken minority parties, is evident in this year's parliamentary elections.

A reconfiguration of 'patronage' politics has been underscored in the voting patterns of Sri Lanka's Muslim polity. Contrary to the general expectation that voters would widely prefer to vote for a winning party that will bring material advancement, as has been the trend in the past, Muslim votes at a glance have largely belied this trend.

We see that those representing 'rights/ideology-based' votes led in numbers at a national level. In this tight 'patronage' versus 'ideologies' contest, the votes that returned 11 Muslim MPs to the opposition benches nationally ought to be treated as a remarkable victory for 'rights/ideology-based' voting, where the opposition exceeds the government camp (of 7 Muslim MPs). The writer is, however, cautious not to treat all Muslims who voted for the UPFA as a homogenous group who only based their votes for patronage's sake, as there are among them also many exceptions of 'rights-based' or 'ideology-based' voters who mainly voted for the UPFA for defeating terrorism.

Although it is plausible that the Muslims voting for the opposition may have done so with the hope of bringing about a change of government, and therefore they too are in a sense 'patronage/development'-based voters; the common knowledge that prevailed on the ground, that the chances were better for the president's party to win, dismissed such a premise. They seem to have made an informed choice in voting on the basis of their 'rights-based' issues when voting for opposition (SLMC) candidates at the general elections.

Hence, the Muslim vote for the SLMC component of the UNP in the North and the East, and for the UNP in the rest of the country, could be treated as a symbol of the 'resistance' of the 'rights-based' voter. Reconfiguration of 'patronage' politics is evident in the way Muslim voters have acted this



time, showing that the core of patronage-seeking voting is 'development' oriented, and that it is only a close second to 'rights-based' voting which is outside the patronage culture.

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Minaa Ishter is a Colombo-based researcher and consultant, currently following a postgraduate degree in Political Science at the University of Colombo.

## Emergency Relaxed – how far?

From our Legal Correspondent

The recent changes in the emergency regulations are limited to one set, the Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions and Powers) Regulations, commonly known as the EMPPR. The Civil Rights Movement has listed some 18 or so additional emergency regulations that remain in force. These include provision for High Security Zones in Galle and Matara, restrictions on the use of outboard motors, restrictions on the procurement of certain items, and the "Anti Terrorism" regulations.

Many of the amendments made to the EMPPR on 2 May 2010 are to be welcomed. These include abolition of several offences, repeal of the provision for the disposal of dead bodies bypassing inquest proceedings, and repeal of the admissibility of confessions made to police officers above a certain rank. Regrettable however is the continuation of detention at the behest of the executive with restriction on the possibility of judicial intervention, and the failure to amend the provisions relating to "surrendees", which in effect provide for detention without trial. Disturbing is the reintroduction of certain provisions detrimental to trade union activity, which had been repealed earlier, but which have now inexplicably found their way back.

Making laws is normally the prerogative of Parliament, and the bypassing of the Legislature procedure by the President in special circumstances must ever be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and control. In the past MPs have been notoriously remiss in their sacred duty of familiarizing themselves with and monitoring the emergency regulations. They have never used their power to alter or revoke any regulation. Will the new MPs show any greater alacrity in protecting the interests of the people who elected them?



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# CULT OF CELEBRITY & THE ELECTIONS

Maya

The world over, the preoccupation of people with the life histories, lifestyles and private lives of celebrities has become obsessive. Sri Lanka is no exception and the choice of celebrities as candidates for the 8 April election is revealing. Several celebrities are contestants as well as nominees on the National Lists of the two major political parties. The UPFA leads the way with a galaxy of 'stars' from the film and sports world including Malini Fonseka, Geetha Kumarasinghe, Susanthika Jayasinghe, Sanath Jayasuriya, and Someratne Dissanayake. The UNP has Upeksha Swarnamali (a.k.a Paba), Rosy Senanayake, and Ranjan Ramanayake.

What are we to make of this phenomenon of celebrities in politics, which is nothing new in South Asia or elsewhere. In India there have been film celebrities such as M.G. Ramachandran, Jayalalitha and Jaya Bacchan, and in Sri Lanka, Vijaya and Jeevan Kumaratunge, Gamini Fonseka, Ranjan Ramanayake and Anarkali have entered politics after successful film/teledrama careers.

M.S.S. Pandian, in his book *The Image Trap*, writes about M.G. Ramachandran's transition from Tamil films to politics, and how actors 'constructed biographies' out of their film personas. Playing celluloid stereotypes such as tough guys, good guys, gods or brave men, or even as women fighting injustice, they have projected these roles onto real life, constructing a favourable image for themselves for political advantage – so much so that it sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish the actual identity of the actor/actress from the fictitious one. Life imitating art, as they say!

## Alternative faces

We have had celebrity endorsements of politicians before. Every key election sees famous figures in the arts, business, sports, and academia co-opted to sanction politicians. The last presidential election also saw the phenomenon of key public servants endorsing the president, thereby compromising the integrity of their institutions. But while the celebrities added, at best, some glamour on the

stage, never before have they come forward in such large numbers to be nominated, or to contest the polls.

Why does the coming election in particular have this feature? Does the entrance of celebrities indicate that people are, by and large, fed up of the current lot of MPs – for their corruption, thuggery, inefficiency and self-serving interests? If so, this indicates that all political parties are aware of how unpopular their MPs are with the general public. But if there is a need for fresh faces, why celebrity faces?

## A quick fix

Having actors, actresses, beauty queens, businessmen, military figures, sports men and women contest elections is a quick fix in the face of unpopularity and uncertainty as to the outcome of the general election. They are the big guns parachuted to give leadership to a district. Under the PR and *manapa* system where everyone contests against everyone else, each contestant also needs a significant amount of money to run a campaign that has an impact on the whole district. Consequently, we see politicians with newly airbrushed, digitally enhanced faces that are part of a whole marketing package. Moreover, thanks to the media they are already household names. Given this 'professionalization' by the entry of marketing/advertising agencies, an election campaign is said to cost Rs. 6 million upwards per contestant. Given the shortage of cash, the media coverage that a cricketer, athlete, or award winner can already command, it is a tremendous advantage. It can be seen as half the campaign done and half its costs covered.

## Role of the media

The celebrity contestants in this election are certainly high achievers whether in the field of cinema, sports, or art. The media has played a significant part in popularizing their names, images, and achievements in their respective fields. But in which way? When it comes to the film stars and producers, we have been fed a regular diet of gossip and trivia about their lives. We are informed of their birthdays, favourite foods, and names of their pets. Once in a way there



are serious reviews of their work. We do not know much about their activism in social movements, or what they have achieved outside of their films and teledramas. Given the sound bite culture that now colonizes our prime-time news bulletins, all we are given – parallel to the trivia about their lives – are short excerpts of what they scream from election platforms and the counter bellow from opposing politicians. Very often in the case of actresses turned politician, the sound bites are those that sexually titillate, insult, and provoke laughter.

### Commitment to social change?

The media, which has played a key role in ushering these celebrities into politics, now has a responsibility to interview and write about them in ways that enlighten the voter about their seriousness and commitment in solving social and economic problems. The media has to highlight their experience in management, community development and statecraft. It has to make us aware of whether these celebrities have the vision necessary and the implementational capacity for the development of this country. Everyone is entitled to a second or third career path. But the political future of a country that has such a long way to go to establish its democratic credentials and develop its economy, needs to be in the hands of those who are experienced, principled and visionary. Glamour does not preclude these – but we need to be sure why we are voting for these people. If one reason why celebrities have been catapulted into politics is as an antidote to unpopular politicians, it is not good enough to merely replace the latter with those who have glamour or once had the stamina to score a hundred runs or run a hundred meters.

### Ethnicity and celebrity

We also need to reflect on why all the contesting celebrities are of Sinhala ethnicity, who have come through the Sinhala cinema or through sports which have a special appeal to Sinhala fans. This is not coincidental and says something about the media and national cultural policies which, over the years, have predominantly supported the Sinhala language arts to the detriment of others. Where are the Tamil actors/acresses not to mention cricketers such as Muralitharan? It also indicates the calculations of parties who assert that the main constituency is Sinhala.

### Blow to democracy?

Where does this leave the committed rural politician who has worked steadily within a party to build a base, or the aspiring young politician, or social worker propelled by the community to become a politician? If this current trend is to continue, then these grassroots groups will be marginalized from national politics given their inability to garner the colossal numbers that political parties seem to be looking for. It is therefore another blow to democratic ideals and practices that this country seems to be fast shedding.

How these celebrities perform at the polls will indicate whether we are comfortable with the blending of politics and celebrity culture. Those who want politics to be a serious business will find the current shift to celebrity politicians distasteful and cynical. Others may want to give them a chance. Still others who have given up on politicians in Sri Lanka may well feel there is nothing more to lose. ■

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## TURNING ETHNOGRAPHIC TABLES: THE POLITICS OF WAR ZONE WRITING

Darini Rajasingham – Senanayake

On 24 April 2005 Dharmaratnam Sivaram ('Taraki') editorial board member of the pro-Tamil website Tamilnet, was found dead from gunshot wounds to the head several hours after four unidentified persons had abducted him from a restaurant opposite a police station in Colombo. His murder, which followed weeks of threats, is as yet "unsolved."

Six years after his death, it is instructive to revisit his politics and draw lessons from a life lived amidst violence. Mark Whitaker's *Learning Politics from Sivaram: The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist* (Pluto Press, 2006) is an extended and moving act of mourning and meditation for Sivaram, arguably the best and brightest of a generation of youth lost in Sri Lanka's interminable post-colonial conflicts. Here is a fine-grained, powerful reflection on war, violence, nationalism and their diminishing returns – not only in Sri Lanka. For those who start reading the book knowing the tragic end of its (anti) hero, this biography of the "life and death of a revolutionary Tamil journalist" is a celebration of a life lived to the full (if not always wisely).

*Learning Politics from Sivaram* is many things: biography, ethnography and intellectual history. At one level, the narrative constitutes an extended ethnographic encounter, initially between a Princeton anthropology graduate student and his informant, Sivaram, then a radical student of politics and philosophy, in Batticaloa, the picturesque, battle-scarred coastal town on Sri Lanka's east coast; their friendship begins with a chance meeting on the steps of the Batticaloa library. On another level, the book is an ethnography of Tamil nationalism and its riposte to post-colonial Sinhala nationalism, violence and displacement. It also touches on diaspora identity politics and the transnational networks that shaped and were shaped by Sivaram. *Learning Politics* is also about idealism and disillusionment, violence and anti-violence, among a lost generation of youth.

Whitaker's project gains considerable importance in the context of the creeping "Militarisation of anthropology" and

related social sciences in an era of the US-led 'global war on terror.' Recently, because of specialized knowledge of other cultures, peoples, histories, religions, languages, ways of being and doing, some anthropologists have been enlisted and embedded to teach cultural sensitivity and identity politics to self-styled forces of counter terrorism and liberal democracy. Social scientists, particularly anthropologists and psychologists, have also been called up to decode, translate, and help win the hearts and minds of Afghans, Iraqis and others. A few have been killed, sometimes by informants. At the same time, the ethics and politics of anthropologists in war zones have become cause for concern, and in 2008 the American and British anthropology associations devoted panels at their annual conferences to the ethics of anthropologists working in war zones, and have sought to review fieldwork codes of conduct – just when it seemed that the discipline had come to terms with its imperial history and complicity in the colonial enterprise.

In *Learning Politics from Sivaram*, however, Whitaker sets out, clearly and self-consciously, to reverse the traditional relationship between anthropologist and native informant and the power/knowledge hierarchies that structure the ethnographic encounter.

### Idealism and the 'making of terrorism'

There are few books that enable us to understand the forces that drive idealistic youth to join social movements that may morph into terror groups or war machines. *Learning Politics* goes some distance towards filling this lacuna. It is a political and intellectual history of the milieu and life worlds of a fractured generation of idealistic and radical Tamil, and to a lesser extent Sinhala, youth caught in Sri Lanka's long and intertwined conflict. It is about the politics of connection between Tamil and Sinhala radical youth allied with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the early days when the collective struggle was for social transformation and economic justice, as much as the later ethnicization of the struggle for social transformation, identity politics, parting



of ways, fragmentation and killings. Sivaram, as Whitaker portrays him, was a Gramscian-style 'organic' intellectual, as well as a fighter and ideologue of the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

The Batticaloa Reading Circle contextualizes the larger strands of this book about Sivaram and his cohorts: intelligent, self-conscious and above all idealistic youth, inspired by world historical intellectual currents of revolutionary Marxism and post-colonial theory, caught in webs of violence, nationalism and civil war that sometimes they themselves had spun. After laying down the book one is struck by the fact that this is the story of a generation of youth lost in the island's two civil wars, the best and brightest of whom had left the island, died or were assassinated – as was Sivaram.

These were youth from communities at the margins of an over-centralized post-colony dominated by urban elites, disillusioned by the failed promise of independent Sri Lanka. Revolutionary Marxism and post-colonial nationalism included carrying guns for the struggle, as evident in the JVP insurrection in the south and Tamil nationalist struggle in the east and north. These young men (the book is silent on women in these movements) were to live and die for the cause of social justice and national liberation, unlike their urban elite counterparts that the book's protagonist tried to relate to in Colombo and the university of Peradeniya; he later gave up, dropping out of University. For these youth from the periphery of the nation-state, an inclusive post-colonial nationalism, civil and political rights and economic justice were integrally and consciously articulated, only to be undermined by militarism, ethno-nationalism and factionalism.

Whitaker chronicles Sivaram's milieu: moving from his home, family, kinship, social and intellectual milieu, to his relocation from Batticaloa to Colombo and later Peradeniya, his fighting years involved with the LTTE and later ambivalence (especially after the Karuna split), the years of journalism, human rights work, Tamilnet, and the end of Sivaram. It is also a biography and intellectual history of a fighter who refused to see flight overseas as an option. Whitaker's protagonist, Sivaram, had dropped out of university to advance the Tamil nationalist struggle, had worked with guns, and somewhere down the line decided that the pen is mightier than the sword.

The process of ethnographic disclosure takes the form of an extended debate, over many years between the two about the uses of violence and nonviolence, an argument inflected

with youthful revolutionary zeal, rhetorical flourishes and post-structuralist jargon that flows back and forth between Whitaker, the anthropologist, and Sivaram – the native informant – both equally versed in post-colonial theory, Wittgenstein, and culture critique. Fieldwork power relations are continuously reversed and reinstated, and finally the hierarchies fragmented in the understanding that the author comes to, that: "nationalism is a proximity issue." Finally, an apolitical US-trained anthropologist learns the ambivalent politics of (violent) engagement beyond the easy political posturing of armchair intellectuals and social science objectivism. A fighter's perspective is given voice and legitimacy. Sometimes Sivaram calls Whitaker "young man" though Whitaker was in fact the older of the two – signalling the constant recalibration of their relationship against the markers of identity, authority and ethnography in the war zone. At other times Whitaker would be fleeing with or saving Sivaram from the powers that be in Colombo.

Whitaker, the 'objective', slightly comic, self-deprecating, American anthropologist learns politics (kinship and kingship) from his informant, friend morphed into fictive kinsman, machang (friend, brother-in-law), Sivaram. In the course of the book anthropologist and informant, both versed in post-structuralism, (neo) Marxism, globalization and its discontents, constantly challenge each other, and Whitaker's notions of social scientific 'objectivity.' The two machangs drink together and work together (quite often in this order) to 'explode' traditional representational frames of the field informant, the anthropologist already attuned to the politics and poetics of representation is tutored in the real-life stakes of knowledge production in the war zone.

### The politics of representation

Even as the 'war on terror,' peace building, and post-war reconstruction (that increasingly look like the same thing these days) seemed to rewire a range of local wars in the global south, military research in contemporary culture wars has become a multibillion dollar knowledge industry. As Sharon Wienberger (2008) has noted: 'Last year, the Pentagon provided almost USD 60 million for the Human Terrain System, a Department of Defence program that represents the latest incarnation of the US military's long, troubled relationship with social science.'

Anthropologists may now teach cultural sensitivity to occupying forces and the finer points of ethno-religious, sectarian and tribal difference among native populations. The specialized ritual and cultural knowledge that they impart may also be used in counterterrorism operations aimed to govern,



divide and rule a population. Cross-cultural encounters wrought in terrorism's 'heart of darkness' have raised troubling spectres of the discipline's origins in the colonial encounter and debates on the role of social science and area studies research in the Cold War. After all, Orientalist modes of knowledge production in the age of empire were rife with power/ knowledge hierarchies that served to govern natives and legitimise colonialism. Has anthropology then come full circle?

The militarization of anthropology has not been without problems: two social scientists have been killed in the field, one in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. Critics fear that this sort of work poses ethical problems, particularly if it's telling the military who is, or isn't, a potential enemy. Last November, the executive board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) condemned the effort, saying it "creates conditions which are likely to place anthropologists in positions in which their work will be in violation of the AAA code of ethics" as well as endanger other anthropologists by bringing suspicion on their activities. The association is also proposing changes to its rules of ethics that would tighten restrictions on secret research.

In this context *Learning Politics from Sivaram* is a timely, relevant and insightful ethnography. In Whitaker's rendition, the war zone is a complex place, crammed with analysis and intellectuals, rather than a tabula rasa as projected in the colonial encounter and more recently in humanitarian and development circles that speak of the "absence of local capacity" social capital, etc. Thus Whitaker notes:

It is one of the peculiarities of Sri Lanka that a nation so lacking in effective political solutions has been nevertheless, so replete with subtle, heartfelt, and accurate analyses of its own failures. For we have already established that there is no shortage of able and eloquent Sri Lankan intellectuals and in fact they are obviously rather thicker on the ground than in my own, deeply anti-intellectual America.

A corrective to dominant representations of conflict zones, and dedicated to "Sri Lankan journalists who like Sivaram risk their lives everyday or have already lost them to keep the stories coming", this book should be mandatory reading for international development and peace-building consultants who fly into conflict-torn countries confident of the

superiority and objectivity of their international 'tool-kits' of and for knowledge production and the concomitant 'lack of local capacity,' imagining conflict-affected countries as peopled by noble savages, victims and brutes in need of aid and psycho-social interventions, aside from a thin layer of 'civil society'— a founding and funding myth of the international aid industry.

Rather, the anthropologist also learns politics from his key-informant, who, Cassandra-like, senses his approaching doom unable to change his fate. Seemingly atoning for past sins, and contributions to *divide et impera* (classifying, dividing and ruling the 'other' was imperialism's past and present), a new post-colonial, politically correct and reflexive anthropology would eschew using anthropological knowledge to exploit social cleavages, and rather explore the ties that bind diverse ethno-religious groups sharing the same land we hope. Whitaker tries to show how Sivaram and his mates sought to work with like-minded Marxists and other fellow travellers who shunned narrow ethnic nationalisms, but eventually gave up the struggle for a purer Marxism.

There is no nostalgia for violence or victimhood in *Learning Politics*. At once sympathetic and hard-headed, consciously avoids the soft-focus, violence-aestheticising and magnifying tropes that characterized over a decade of anthropological analysis of 'ethnic' conflict and stories of rumours of violence and victim-hood (that often legitimize renewed violence) in villages, troubled and untroubled, near and far in Sri Lanka, since the war's beginning and the discipline's interpretative turn. From Batticaloa, his primary fieldwork site in the heart of the conflict zone, the book moves well beyond attempts to tell stories of violence from the "native's point of view"; romances with others, their violence, victim-hood and suffering, with a stated purpose: to portray the agency and analysis of the informant/ 'terrorist' maccang, and learn from him, while locating him for the reader in his social and intellectual milieu.

Whitaker is in good intellectual company when turning ethnographic tables, learning from, rather than 'translating' the 'other' in Sri Lanka, an island favoured by anthropologists if not the gods. Finally, one wishes that Whitaker had followed the logic of Sivaram's later arguments on the transnational dimensions of violence in the island. That apart, this book may mark the coming of age of 'ethnic conflict' analysis and the 'anthropology of violence' on Sri Lanka. ■



# AVATAR AS A PARABLE

Rohini Hensman

I should clarify from the beginning that this is not a film review of *Avatar*, more a comment on its politics, and on other commentaries on its politics.

The plot is simple. In the year 2154, a colony of humans has been set up by RDA corporation, headed by Parker Selfridge, on the distant planet Pandora, with the intention of mining its reserves of the incredibly valuable mineral unobtainium. But the indigenous inhabitants, the Na'vi, are an obstacle to this goal, since the unobtainium lies beneath the forest they inhabit, with the biggest deposit beneath their ancestral Hometree. Dr Grace Augustine heads the Avatar programme, which blends the DNA of individual human beings with that of the Na'vi to create Na'vi avatars which can be controlled by the mind of the human. Through this, they can establish contact with the Na'vi, find out about them and their habitat, and hopefully persuade them to cooperate with the company. But should they fail, the military wing under Colonel Miles Quaritch is poised to remove them by force.

Jake, a paraplegic ex-marine, gets involved in the avatar programme because his twin brother, a scientist originally involved in it, was killed in a mugging. But as the mission proceeds, Jake, like his colleagues Grace and Norm, comes to appreciate the culture of the Na'vi even as he provides strategic information about them in his debriefing sessions; moreover, he falls in love with Neytiri, a Na'vi female, and she falls in love with him. Selfridge and Quaritch get impatient and give Grace and Jake just one hour to convince the Na'vi to vacate their habitat, failing which the military will swing into action. In attempting to carry out this mission, Grace and Jake have to reveal their part, upon which the Na'vi accuse them of betrayal and tie them up, but at this point the onslaught on Hometree, in which many Na'vi are killed, begins. The human avatars of Grace, Norm and Jake are held captive by Quaritch for treason, but Trudy, a security force pilot disgusted by all this violence, flies them out, along with their laboratory, to the jungle. In the crucial battle, these four as well as another scientist, Dr Max Patel, fight on the side of the Na'vi, and Grace and Trudy are killed by the security forces, along with hundreds of Na'vi. But the attack

is finally repelled, and the invaders sent back to their depleted planet earth. Jake, Norm and Max remain with the Na'vi.

Frederick Alexander Meade accuses the film of promoting White supremacy because its hero displays physical, intellectual and spiritual superiority over the Na'vi (Meade 2010). Reading this, anyone who has not seen the film would never imagine that Jake, in his White avatar, spends his time throughout the film seated in a wheelchair or lying in a machine; he cannot stand or walk, much less fight or conquer. At the end of the film, Neytiri has to save him from imminent death by despatching Quaritch with her bow and arrows. It is only in his Na'vi avatar – which is far superior to his White one – that he can match the indigenous beings physically. Furthermore, he starts off naïve and sufficiently uncritical of his own culture to participate in a project aimed at displacing the Na'vi by any means required; it is only when his eyes are opened to the criminal enterprise in which his employers are engaged that he switches sides.

It is true that near the beginning, Neytiri refrains from killing him because a sacred seed lands on her arrow when she is about to shoot him. Does this signify, as Meade suggests, that he is their 'redeemer'? One would hardly think so from the way in which Neytiri proceeds to berate him! As her mother, who is the spiritual leader of the clan, seems to confirm, the seed is simply saying, 'Don't kill him, give him a chance, he can change.' Again, he does succeed in mounting the flying Toruk, which only a few members of the community have ever been able to do. But he does this in a desperate bid to win back their trust after they have cast him out for betraying them, because he needs their help to heal Grace, who is dying. And it is surely perverse to think that Eywa, the deity, responds to his prayer for help because he is spiritually superior to the Na'vi, and not because she wants to save them from extermination! Would she have answered his prayer if he had prayed for the company's mission to succeed? Surely not.

What has occurred here is a conversion, but in the opposite direction to the one sought by the invaders. Jake and his



friends risk their lives to stand by the Na'vi, and two of them are killed in the process. Throughout, the Na'vi are portrayed as being superior to the White invaders physically, intellectually and spiritually; only in terms of military hardware are the invaders superior, and here the solidarity offered to them by Jake and Trudy is critical. Only someone who is quite insecure in his or her coloured skin could read this as a White supremacist narrative.

George Monbiot's take on the film is more perceptive (Monbiot 2010). He describes the film as 'profound' because it is a metaphor for the American Holocaust, the worst genocide in human history, in which some 100 million indigenous people of the Americas and Caribbean were exterminated by European invaders. He notes that the Right hates *Avatar*, recognizing the subversive potential of a film which encourages its viewers to 'root for the defeat of American soldiers', and concludes that the film "speaks of a truth more important – and more dangerous – than those contained in a thousand arthouse movies." Yet he also describes the film as 'profoundly silly' because it has a happy ending which does not reflect the reality; and here, possibly, he may be wrong. At least, let us hope so, because the drama it depicts has not yet been played out.

As the recent UN Report on the State of the World's Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2010) reminds us, there are still 370 million indigenous people in the world, and many are still being subjected to displacement and dispossession, and suffer physical abuse, imprisonment, torture and even death if they try to assert their rights. Nowhere is this more true than in India's forest belt, where the Adivasis (indigenous people of India) are being displaced from their traditional habitats by the pursuit of 'development', of late driven mainly by commercial interests including mining. As an official report notes, 'As tribal areas are also rich in mineral resources, the mining projects proposed such as in Orissa, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh threaten the very existence of tribal people' (Government of India 2008: 15).

Indeed, the heart-breaking moment in *Avatar*, when the ancestral Hometree of the Na'vi is destroyed and many are killed while the rest are displaced, could well be a metaphor for what is happening in the state of Chhattisgarh in Central India, where the security forces of a fascist state government, together with a state-sponsored, largely tribal militia (Salwa Judum), have driven tens of thousands of Adivasis out of their villages and destroyed them. In the process, many have been injured, tortured, raped and killed. One non-tribal activist fighting against these injustices, renowned Dr

Binayak Sen, was arrested and kept behind bars for over two years on false charges (Wajihuddin 2009); another, Himanshu Kumar, had his Gandhian ashram destroyed, and has suffered continuous harassment (Gautam 2009). Journalists and human rights activists trying to investigate and report on the situation have been assaulted physically and kept out. Inordinate effort was needed to get Sodhi Sambho, a young Adivasi woman who was witness to a massacre, the medical treatment she needed for her bullet-shattered leg; yet even in hospital she remained a virtual captive of the state police, effectively cut off from journalists and even from her lawyer in the case pertaining to the massacre. Three other witnesses were detained by the police, who are the alleged perpetrators: the very opposite of a witness-protection programme (Jha 2010; Iqbal 2010; Sethi 2010).

Some Adivasis have joined the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (also known as 'Maoists' or 'Naxalites') in order to fight the state security forces, even though the goal of the CPI (Maoist) (capturing state power) and its methods (destruction of schools and infrastructure, recruitment of child soldiers, summary execution of those labelled as informers, etc.) are inimical to the welfare of the Adivasis and their own demands (Human Rights Watch 2008). The central government is supporting a military attack on the Maoists, despite the fact that many unaffiliated Adivasis will be caught in the crossfire, even though its own report (Government of India 2008) makes it clear that so long as unchecked violations of the legal and constitutional rights of Adivasis continue, they will continue to be pushed into the ranks of the Maoists. It is probably in recognition of this fact that the government is considering legislation that will restrict mining by private sector companies in tribal areas, and take into consideration constitutional provisions for the protection of tribal communities and their rights. Mining companies are already lobbying against this proposed restriction of their access to our earthly equivalents of unobtainium (Narayan 2010). Unless there is even stronger counter-lobbying by tribal rights, human rights and environmentalist groups, it is unlikely that this legislation will ever make it to the statute books. Poor implementation of the otherwise laudable Forest Rights Act (2007) demonstrates that pressure for implementation is equally important.

Similar events are occurring in other countries, and the bows and arrows of the indigenous people are as ineffective against the firepower of the invaders as they were in the time of Columbus. Yet they do have weapons that were not available



in 1492: legal and constitutional rights, environmental laws, international law, greater knowledge of the devastating environmental impact of deforestation and militarism, and modern information and communication technologies. Struggles in the real world are more complicated and messy than the clean-cut fight between good and evil in the world of *Avatar*: the invaders are not necessarily White; some of the indigenous people may collaborate with them, while others may join groups like the Maoists whose interests clash with their own; indigenous people belonging to different tribes may fight each other for control over the same territory; some tribal customs may be extremely oppressive, especially to women; for many indigenous people, their biggest problem may be the discrimination and exclusion they face in mainstream society; and all these actors have to share the same planet, in some cases the same country. But is it profoundly silly to think that the surviving indigenous people of the world can win sufficient control over their lives and habitats to secure freedom from poverty, indignity and violent abuse? The happy ending of *Avatar* encourages us to hope that it is not.

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## ETERNAL MEMORY

For Eva Ramweera

Not event  
 Became event  
 Through your fertile mind  
 Knit in phrases  
 With deft hands,  
 Exceptional your creations  
 Like a war hero's.  
 Unique the skill and power within  
 To reach the intended goal,  
 In no other but you alone  
 Have I seen

Mala Dassanayake  
 ('Translation')



# “WHEN A TRUTHFUL WOMAN SPEAKS, IT IS LIFE THAT IS SPEAKING”

A review essay by Sarojini Jayawickrama

*Speaking for Myself: An Anthology of Asian Women's Writing*, edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Malashri Lal published by the Penguin Group, 2009, 557 pp.

**S**peaking for Myself, offers a wide spectrum of writings by women who are from places as far distant from each other as Azerbaijan and Sri Lanka. A prism which reflects the many facets of women's lives, it makes audible the voices of women as they lead their lives in diverse roles, not simply as mother, wife or daughter, the conventional roles which society assigns them, but as political activist, social reformer and educator. They express their very individualistic and innovative ideas, refusing to be constrained by the patriarchal norms and expectations under which they are compelled to live. The voice of the narrator in Tsuboi Sakai's "Umbrella on a Moonlit Night" (Japan, 55-68), seems to sum up the everyday experiences of many women, when reflecting on the monotonous tenor of her life and her friends: "We were housewives who for some twenty years had relied solely on our husband's pocketbooks. Like tame dogs, we had, without even knowing it, lost what little rebelliousness we once had. We were, in short, faithful wives who took comfort in being ordinary mothers." (55). Dissatisfied with their lives economically dependent on their husbands they bond together and meet regularly to share their joys and grief, forming a club 'the kind of club where we seemed to dominate our husbands once in a while.' These young women come together in an attempt to transcend the narrow confines of their mundane lives as 'faithful wives' and 'ordinary mothers'. But running through this 'rebellion' is the constant pressure of socio-cultural norms of behaviour and the tension between the women's desire for freedom from the demands of husband and children and their emotional ties to their families. This ambivalence characterizes many of the writings in the collection, imbuing them with a complexity that enhances their interest.

The selection of writings, short stories and poems are drawn from a heterogeneous fund of experience, cultural and socio-

political contexts marked by different ways of seeing and modes of articulation. In the editors' words they are 'not necessarily representative writings from different Asian countries', but 'hope that they will serve as a take-off point for further exploration.' (xx). Most of the writings are translations from the original Asian languages and the selection is of necessity limited by the paucity of English translations of Asian writings. A translation cannot always capture the nuances of the experiential and emotional content of a writer's psyche. To convey, not simply the bare bones of meaning but also the rich connotations of a word of one language in another, poses problems; the many layers of cultural content which imbues a word is often lost in translation. Yet, the translations here seem to have succeeded in capturing the essence of what the writer wants to convey as in the imagery in Fadwa Taqan's 'A Mountainous Journey' (Palestine); the stultifying psychological effect of the isolation from the outside world on herself is described in these terms: 'my femininity whimpering like a wounded animal in the cage finding no means of expression' or as in the translation of Rizia Rahman's 'Irina's Picture' (Bangladesh, 303-18), which uses the beautifully evocative metaphor "a world floating in milk froth" to etch a landscape enveloped in thick morning mist.

## Shattering the stereotype

**R**ooted as these writings are in the cultural and social milieus that are the genesis for their creation, an understanding of the specific socio-political contexts from which they spring will no doubt enhance our understanding of the central experiences of the protagonists. In 'Melody in Dreams' (China, 17-35), a knowledge of the climate of harsh repression and the persecution of intellectuals during and after the 'Cultural Revolution' in China adds a further dimension to our perception of the strength of resolve and commitment to the cause of intellectual and personal freedom embodied in the nineteen year old Liang Xia. Defiant and daring she says, 'I don't want to hide anything from you...



As you know I'm not afraid of anything'. The image of woman presented by Zong Pu as dignified, courageous and complex shatters the stereotypical image of the Asian woman as passive and submissive. Liang Xia poignantly expresses her hope for the future, 'the dream of the people will be fulfilled. The reactionaries will be smashed. Historically this is inevitable', a hope Zong Pu would have shared. Zong Pu's narrative has a powerful impact for she writes from personal experience of the persecution of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution.

### Threads that bind

Despite the contextual diversity, strong threads bind them, weaving these writings from East to West Asia into an intricately patterned tapestry. The warp and weft of the fabric – affinities of belief, concerns, perspectives, a repertoire of myths and legends, traditions of storytelling, religions, even languages, for instance Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil and Sindhi are spoken in more than one country – web them. Existential questions that figure in the sensibilities of women, who are the protagonists in these writings, transcend the boundaries of cultural and geographical locations reaching out from specific contexts and find points of identification. The writings are often third person narratives, the protagonists all being women who resist becoming constructs of the patriarchal communities in which they live. They speak for themselves not being ventriloquized by others. They attempt to fashion their own subjectivity but at times their world view is filtered through the lens of patriarchy and they become 'accomplice[s] and ... consenting agent[s] of patriarchy, being ... [themselves] very much a product of patriarchal socialization.' (xxii).

The writings in the anthology are not organized thematically. Nor are they listed under different countries the editors not prescribing them as being representative of countries or even of individual writers. "We decided to let geographical boundaries collapse and just have clusters of countries clubbed together as East Asia" Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia and South East Asia" (xxvi), they say, setting out the rationale for the organization. But the grouping of writings under these different rubrics is not meant to deny or blur the 'differences present within each of the clusters'. A refreshing feature of the anthology is that the editors do not impose their viewpoint on the reader but lets the reader identify for her/himself the thematic threads that run through them and

the 'cultural co-ordinates within and across each of them'. An insightful Introduction gently nudges us in the direction of the salient issues addressed in these writings. A concise and useful biographical note on the writers, identify the main thrust of the writings. Assigning specific dates to them would have helped us to contextualise them better particularly when the writings are grounded in the personal lives of the writers as many of them are.

The women writers address a spectrum of issues which range from lesbianism, prostitution, terrorism, war, patriotism, motherhood and family relationships, interrogating cultural perceptions and attitudes to these issues which are deeply divisive and figure vitally in most cultures today. These are indeed existential and perennial. The writers reveal a deeply compassionate view of the marginalized woman, the lesbian, the prostitute, the sufferer from AIDS and leprosy, questioning concepts of morality and 'honour' and the double standards which emanate from a male-centred point of view, often too from women themselves who become 'consenting agents' of patriarchy nurtured and socialized by patriarchal institutions.

I have attempted to identify the overarching themes that run through many of these writings, discerning ways of seeing and emblematic motifs that occur in them. Constraints of space preclude the discussion of many of the writings. I hope through my discussion to stimulate an interest in further explorations of the anthology.

### 'Not to lure or seduce men'

The commodification of women is a distinct thread that runs through many of these writings. In 'My Sister' (217-25), the Cambodian writer Mey Son Suthary adopts a male persona, that of the brother. Through the dynamics of a close-knit family she explores women's social problems often generated by economic deprivation. Keo, the 'Elder Sister', who is animated by a sense of responsibility for her younger siblings, prostitutes herself so that she can finance their education. The predictable judgmental response of the brother, when he discovers that her job working for a 'foreign investment company' is simply a fiction she uses to mask her actual occupation as a bargirl, is critiqued perhaps rather overtly. His conventional attitude to a bar girl as one who degrades herself and brings shame on her family – 'I felt both betrayed and terribly insulted' – is contrasted with those



of the women of the family. In conveying the difference, Mey Son Sotheary lets the dialogue between brother, sister and aunt, speak for itself subtly suggesting the contrast rather than overtly stating it. The younger sister is able to transcend conceptualising Keo as a bar girl. 'Whatever she does she's still our sister' (221), while the brother arrogantly asks her, "Are you good enough to be our sister?"

The commodification of women is addressed not only by this Cambodian writer; the issue surfaces in many writings criss-crossing from one culture to another from Cambodia to Lebanon, as in "A Girl Called Apple" (508-11), or to Tibet in "Journal of the Grassland" (200-209). There is a strong sense of a need for a search for justice for these exploited women, labelled, prostitute, lesbian or even daughter of marriageable age (a salable commodity). It goes in tandem with an interrogation of social practices such as a father's prerogative to choose a marriage partner for his daughter, to withhold education from her or negotiate and barter with another man, a bride price in exchange for her. In 'Journal of the Grassland' even the women seem to be accepting not resisting these patriarchal practices but colluding in them, simply demanding a fair price for the young niece who is to be married to a man much older than her – 'If you are going to sell then sell right.'

Many of the writers explore the image of woman and of her sexuality. In 'Defiance of a Flower', Chiranan Pitprecha (Thailand, 282) renders a positive image of woman, not simply as a sex object, 'Her ply of ligaments is meant of heavy task/ Not for the craving of flimsy silk and damask,' but as one fired with aspiration, 'To search for new life.../ Not to lure or seduce men.' She is a complete human being, able to fulfil her potential and evolve a life of her own, 'Not to lean on others /... Not just to blossom and await admirers ...But to bloom and embrace/ The fertility of the land.'

Taslina Nasreen's poem 'Things Cheaply/ Had' (Bangladesh, 301) seems at first glance to present the woman who degrades herself, selling her body as cheap merchandise in exchange for material goods; 'If they get a jewel for their nose/ they lick feet for seventy days or so/a full three and a half months/ if it's a striped sari.'

But the last verse dramatically overturns this image. Its impact on the reader is one of shocked horror as the realization of the cost in physical abuse that these women suffer silently and submissively as cheap commodities for rich 'patrons', pierces the reader's consciousness. 'Even the mangy cur of the house barks now and then, /but over the mouths of battered women / there's a lock,/a golden lock.'

This is one of a pair of powerful poems in which Nasreen presents the woman exploited for her sexual appeal, in a compassionate and positive light. At the same time she draws a harsh and negative portrait of men. In 'Women Can't' (302) she makes a strong indictment of men who 'Touch a body of flesh/Without love'. 'Only animals and men can/ Touch a body of flesh/ Without love/ Women can't.'

The poems are provocative, shocking the reader, impelling her/him to interrogate the flaws in society that compel women to sell their bodies; the social critiquing is conveyed dramatically through the visual imagery.

### Composite pictures

The portraits of women who emerge from these writings are not uni-dimensional. Women in their many roles, as mother, wife or daughter, in relationships to their husbands and children, other women, and to their fellow workers in the workplace, are etched. 'Motherhood' figures as the focus of many of the writings; as the editors reflect, this perhaps suggests its significance in many of the cultures and societies of Asia. It is not presented as sacrosanct, where the mother has to make a total submission of herself, to 'being' a mother. The mothers in these writings do find a space for themselves, resisting the social construct of the 'mother' as one who has to make a total submission of herself to 'motherhood'. Instead, as in 'Afagh Masud's 'Sparrows' (Azerbaijan, 435-45), the mother breaks away from the restrictive structures of family life, perhaps tearing herself reluctantly from the bonds that tie her to her daughter and husband, to fashion for herself her identity. Like Nora in Ibsen's 'A Doll's House', she shuts the door on her life of dreary domesticity and patriarchal controls taking flight like the sparrows. In 'Sparrows' as in many of her short stories Masud explores the psychological constraints in patriarchal cultures where women are slotted into roles and not expected to stray outside their confines. 'Sparrows' is related through the consciousness of the observant daughter whose attitude to the mother's attempts to free herself from her life through her writing, is ambivalent. There is no overt understanding or condemnation of the mother's 'flight'. Different writers explore the concept of motherhood conjuring up different pictures of the 'mother'. The ambivalence that characterizes some of them invests them with an intriguing complexity, for they reflect in their many ways the reality of 'being' a mother.

Fadwa Tuqan who was one of the most influential poets in modern Palestinian poetry explores the psychological and intellectual sterility in the lives of women cloistered in the



harem, the women's wing of her father's house. 'The house was like a large coop filled with domestic birds, contented to peck the feed thrown to them without argument.' In an excerpt from her autobiographical writing 'A Mountainous Journey' (531-39) published in the anthology, she presents a graphic description of her life of isolation from the political and social currents of her country. The domineering figure of the father, who keeps her isolated, demands that she writes poetry on the political situation of Palestine – 'how could I wage war with my pen for political, ideological or national freedom?', she asks. The relationship between Tuqan and her father is marked by conflicting emotions 'I did not hate him, neither did I love him.' Contending with the desire to please him by writing the poetry he wants is a feeling of rebellion, and protest and a refusal to comply results. Tuqan presents the impact of the repressive, steellike hands of prohibition on a woman – her emotional and intellectual life is stultified and the springs of creativity dry up and she is no longer able to write poetry. There is a crisis. Isolated from life and experiencing a sense of complete alienation she loses contact with reality and attempts to take her own life. The death of her father liberates her, 'I entered into life drinking it in large drafts'. The lifting of the veil in Palestine in 1948, when women could divest themselves of the dress which covered them from head to toe that they had been forced to wear, completes her emancipation. She emerges out of the emotional desert which she had hitherto inhabited to explore and taste the reality of love which until then had been only an abstract concept.

Fadwa Tuqan's writing weaves together family dynamics, political and emotional maturation and liberation. The death of the father, the authority figure, prefigures the escape from the 'prison of the harem', a lifting of the veil and social, political and emotional liberation and Tuqan is able to voice her beliefs. 'The time has arrived for this daughter of life to speak and, when a truthful woman speaks, it is life that is speaking.'

#### 'What kind of woman is that?'

In 'Giribala' (India, 323-40), Mahasweta Devi, a deeply committed social activist, whose 'Draupadi' many of us may have read, 'endorses the strength of a woman's affirmative right' (xxv) – a woman's right to take decisive action as to the trajectory of her life. In presenting Giribala's defiance of her community's disapproval of her action in leaving her husband, taking her children with her, Mahasweta Devi summons up in the reader's mind the iconic image of 'shakti', the emblem of feminist power. It is an image that resonates in the sensibility of Asian women and would strike a chord of empathy in them. It is the kind of emblematic

motif that crosses geographical boundaries and culturally links these stories from different Asian regions. They help to forge a picture of Asian women, who emerge from these writings; their contours are similar to each other but intriguingly different in their many-sidedness.

Mahasweta Devi presents the response of women in the community to Giribala's act of defiance, when she leaves her home of bamboo and thatched roof, the 'benefits' from the sale of her daughters by a pimp, with the silent connivance of her husband Aulchhand. Living within the parameters of patriarchal institutions, socialized by patriarchal culture, the women collude with the men in their disapproval of Giribala's action: 'Why leave your husband and go away? What kind of woman is that?' Irony tinged with humour characterizes Devi's narration. There is no overt condemnation of the no-good Aulchhand, or even of the pimp, Mohan. Her critique is not of individuals but of the patriarchal framework where the mindset towards the girl-child is expressed in the words, 'a girl's by fate discarded, lust if she is dead, lost if she is wed,' which echoes and re-echoes chant-like in 'Giribala' – a cynical view that equates marriage with death.

#### 'Virtuous whores'

As much as iconic images are drawn upon to reinforce a woman's stances, cultural images from religious and mythic sources are challenged and subverted in some of the writings. In 'The Stigma' (India, 369-82), Sarami, the protagonist of Pratibha Ray's short story, exposes the hypocrisy of the women of the community, who while indulging in adulterous liaisons with men metaphorically clothe themselves in the virtuous vestments of Sita and Savitri, the iconic representations of chastity and fidelity in Hindu mythology. Sarami, a young and beautiful woman married to a much older man is compelled to live in the same house as her young brother-in-law and nephew who both make flirtatious and lecherous advances constantly having to repel 'their hungry looks, the suggestive gestures, the audacious flirtations.'

'The Stigma' is mainly a thirdperson narrative, shot through with interpolations from Sarami's consciousness presented in a stream of consciousness technique. Ray's powerful short story uncovers the double standards vis-à-vis men and women, the repressive effect of cultural images as they impact on women's lives, subliminally monitoring their behaviour in a relentless fashion, and the cultural practices endorsed by society such as the dowry system which regulates marriage and the belief in horoscopes and the effect of the stars and



planets on people's lives. These are familiar practices in most Asian cultures. They all connive to absolve men of blame, making the woman the 'guilty party' for all misfortunes, even for miscarriages: 'they were no reflection on Rahn Tiadi's masculinity. Yes, yes Sarani was squarely to blame'. The pressure to live up to the ideal of perfect womanhood embodied in Sita and Savitri, repressing her sexual desires, 'a flaming snake of desire slithering inside her entrails', inflamed by the proximity of the young men, Sarani has to 'dam the surging tide of desire', which then manifests itself in a psychosomatic hysteria. The cultural conditioning, her own conscience and the threat of the community discovering her infidelity prevent her from 'whoring around to her heart's content.'

Ray presents the onset of the hysteria dramatically: 'Just as the molten fire in the womb of the earth sometimes flames and breaks free, spitting smoke, lava and ash ... so too the repressed sexual desires smouldering within Sarani would sometimes erupt like a volcano.' The women of the community guess what underlies her hysteria and condemn Sarani, 'She's dying for you-know-what, the bitch, the immoral bitch.' When they mete out the same ostracism to another young woman married to an old man, Sarani, now an old woman, challenges them to swear 'on the heads of your husbands and sons that 'not a single dirty thought ever flitted across your minds.' Her challenge rings out in strident tones to 'all you Sitas, all you Savitris, all you virtuous whores.' The oxymoron is intensely effective, the phrase underscores the hypocrisy of the women with their 'dirty little secrets', etching it indelibly in our consciousness.

Sarani's final act is to gently wipe 'the stains of the stigma' from the young wife's forehead. The 'stigma' she erases is the red tilak traced on the forehead of a young Hindu woman on marriage to indicate her status as a wife. Pratibha Ray's play on the word 'stigma' subverts the sacrosanct power of the red tilak. It is seen as the external manifestation of the controlling power of patriarchy. Wiping it away Sarani symbolically frees the young woman from the chains that bind her to her old husband. Ray provokes us to question the meanings of the words 'stigma' and 'sin.' We ourselves ask the question posed at the end of the story, 'but could she be rid of a stigma for a sin she had never committed in the first place?'

### Icons and alter egos

**T**hematic strands cross over from one country to another and through images weld cultures into a shared world of

perceptions. The iconic image of Sita resonates in the psyche of the Asian woman, particularly in South Asia and South East Asia. Leika S Chudori's 'Purification of Sita' (Indonesia, 242-48) plays with the legend from the *Ramayana*, using it as a trigger to expose the double standards in a culture, particularly as they impact on a woman's life. Chudori's narrative technique is to conflate the story of Sita in the Indian epic with that of the young Asian woman living in Canada. The narrative seamlessly slips from the consciousness of Sita to that of the young woman; the contours of Sita's story is at times indistinguishable from that of her modern-day alter ego. Aeons of time separate the two, yet both have to prove their 'purity' to a patriarchal authority—Sita abducted by the demon god Ravana to her husband Rama, and the young woman to her fiancé separated from her for four years.

The narrative technique and the mirroring of images underscore the parallels between the two. The searing heat of the flames Sita braves to immolate herself is replicated in the relentless heat of the Canadian summer. An image of Rama, the reincarnation of the Great King Vishnu, alternates with that of her fiancé until his face imperceptibly begins to resemble that of the Great King. Through these devices Chudori reinforces her point that a woman's situation has not changed significantly from time immemorial to the present day. A man seems able to continue to justify his infidelity with the arrogant assertion 'But I'm a man', with a man's prerogative, 'complete freedom to give free rein to our desires.' At the end of the story the young woman muses as to what would have happened if Sita had questioned her husband about his fidelity, an opportunity she was never given. The same question arises in our minds provoking us to question the double standards of morality in society, an issue Chudori focusses on in many of her writings.

### Storytelling and bonding

**W**e have seen mythic figures subliminally empowering and constraining a woman's life. Empowering too is the tradition of storytelling which exists in many cultures. Stories become the conduit through which women bond with each other sharing experiences. The articulation of experiences of suffering has a cathartic effect. The Tibetan writer Geyang unfolds an 'Old Nun Tells Her Story' (186-99), demonstrating the efficacy of storytelling in activating a process of selfdefinition and selfknowledge thereby shoring up a woman's sense of self. The nun relates her story with great restraint and dignity. Strikingly evident is the equanimity with which she faces the vicissitudes in her life uncomplainingly, even a faint demur is not audible.



Geyang's portrayal of the nun is characterized by understatement. There is no intrusive narrative voice. The nun speaks for herself and we listen. The woman who emerges from the cameo-like nuanced portrayal is not a malleable victim, which at first she seems to be, controlled by her mother, the regime of the convent and later after marriage by a resentful sister-in-law. Disciplined in a life of austerity, prayer and meditation from the age of eight, she has to metamorphose herself into a girl of marriageable age and a noblewoman upon marriage to a man twenty years older. The transition is not easy. 'I realized that the life I'd led in the convent had been so remote from anything my family had experienced that I could probably not be like them again.'

Geyang lets the nun's voice trace the significant events of her chequered life dispassionately. After marriage, maturing and developing, becoming a wife and mother and then a widow, she faces the death of her husband and financial deprivation with fortitude. She returns to the convent, living again in a community of women, her natural habitat and the life she chooses of her own free will. Reestablishing rapport with her convent sisters many of whom are still alive, she shares her life's story with them: 'We tell each other the stories of our lives and everything we've suffered becomes something beautiful.' The women of the convent experience a sense of empowerment in articulating and sharing with each other the stories of their suffering.

Underlying this strength is self-reflection that punctuates the nun's narrative. It initiates a process of self-knowledge equipping her with the capacity to grapple with the problems she has to face: 'From what I endured in those days ... I learned that the most beautiful thing in life is not splendour and luxury ... or occupying a position of power wherever you go, but the self-assurance that come from having to overcome obstacles, step by step, through your own perseverance.' A worldview permeated by the Buddhist philosophical teachings that she has imbibed from childhood informs the nun's response to the cataclysmic changes in her life. An understanding of the transience of life that underpins Buddhism helps her to cope with them. It is a concept familiar to many South Asian and South East Asian readers: one of those threads that bind these writings creating a shared world of belief among readers as well as empathy between readers and the protagonist narrator. A quietly confident assertion stemming from the insights she has gained from her life concludes her story: 'I realize now that the

tumultuous life of a human being is no more than a passing flash of light against the timelessness of nature.'

There is no photographic memory of a life steeped in a culture and faith unfamiliar to her. Jean Arasanayagam gathers the fragments of her mother-in-law's life from storytelling. The relationship between her mother-in-law and herself is a subject Arasanayagam often engages with in her poetry and short stories. It is one presented as being fraught with tension and even hostility. In another poem simply titled 'My Mother-in-Law' (*Women, All women*, 1999), Arasanayagam sees herself as seen by her husband's family 'as the usurper whose reign/ Unacknowledged was soon forgotten'. The mood in 'Wedding Photographs' (Sri Lanka, 418-20) is different; she does not speak of her non-acceptance by her mother-in-law - 'Yes she chose not to know me' (from 'My Mother-in-law').

As the poem progresses there is a sense of a truce between the two of them. The sharp corners of their relationship have been blunted. 'The threads of the mother-in-law's life are delicately woven into a portrait of a woman given in marriage as a child bride, at sixteen to a man twenty years older. She has now been widowed and says 'part of my life too/ Perished on his pyre.' Through the conversation between them a sense of companionship develops between the two women. They have both aged and mellowed. 'We sit face to face, musing over each other's/ Lives, thinking of gnarled feet stepping over the stumbles... /... of our spent lives, of ago and passing time.'

The younger woman listens as the mother-in-law's tale unravels. It has been a life deeply rooted in traditional cultural practices and her Hindu faith. Memory embedded in story telling seems to create empathy and understanding, perhaps giving the younger woman an understanding of why the mother-in-law resented the intrusion into her life of a woman of a different ethnicity and faith. There is no overt comment in Arasanayagam's poem; the mother-in-law's story speaks for itself, and encapsulated in it is a life that the poet presents in words evocative and luminous.

### Woman as truth-teller

Ratna Sarumpaet, herself a political activist, opens a window on the world of a woman activist-woman in the public domain in 'Marsinah Accused' (Sumatra, 161-76). Imprisoned for participating in a pro-democracy meeting in Jakarta in the last days of the Suharto regime, Sarumpaet's writing is rooted in personal experience which gives dramatic



immediacy to the excerpt from 'Marsinah Accuses' published in the anthology. It engages with the fate of a woman activist killed for demanding higher wages for a fellow worker in a factory. Familiar as they are with the suppression of freedom and protest and the victimization of dissidents, Asian readers can empathize strongly with Marsinah for whose murder no one has been held accountable. The contextual framework for the play is that Marsinah wishes to return to Earth to avenge her death and demand justice for herself and others who may have to confront a similar fate: 'my death is a symbol of your death, a symbol of the death of a generation, of the death of all hope for change...'. At a performance to be held in conjunction with the launch of a book about her, she intends to remind the audience that no one has been brought to justice for her murder.

Sarumpaet's play is tremendously moving. When it opens on a darkened stage, the spectral figure of Marsinah rises from a platform in the cemetery and addresses the audience, recounting the torture she suffered at the hands of her persecutors. As a woman she is subjected to the kind of brutal punishment that could only be meted out to a woman, 'I was silenced – not just with a shawl, but with torture, rape, the vicious and secret plunder of my body.' The only figure on the stage is that of Marsinah. Except for the whispered sounds of people reading from the Koran and the music from a traditional Javanese song, we hear only her voice. Voices from the past intrude on Marsinah's consciousness as her monologic voice recapitulates the past. They link past and present, and stimulate in Marsinah's memory the trauma of the past, releasing in her psyche a gamut of emotions – tension, anxiety, defiance, sadness and anger. In impassioned tones she denounces all the institutions of state that colluded in her murder. Defiantly she refuses to be intimidated: "They try to harm me but I will not be afraid and I will not stop! I will stand in their midst and I will face them down! Yes my executioners..."

Through the voice of the dead Marsinah, Sarumpaet lays bare the brutal assault on individual rights, the subversion of all state institutions and the breakdown of law and order, which were endemic in Sumatra in the last days of the dictatorial Suharto regime. Marsinah's turn-telling voice indicts the country as 'A corrupt land, a people for whom power is everything, a nation where the exercise of power justifies everything'. Marsinah's accusation is levelled at society itself. The guilt for her killing must be borne by everyone, 'You allowed my life to be taken from me.' She calls on everyone to avenge her death, 'Don't let my death be for nothing.' In their silence, society has colluded in her

killing and the withholding of justice from her, as we all do when we turn aside and ignore the erasure of rights in our own societies. Sarumpaet's writing focusses not only on the past in Sumatra but addresses issues which are vitally significant in today's world, tainted so often with the same flaws.

In 'Dead-end' (India, 351-65) Ajeet Cour questions the concept of 'extremist'. The narrative voice is that of a young girl who gives refuge to an eighteen-year-old boy, suspected of being an extremist, on the run from the police who are on his trail. In reply to her question of whether he is an extremist, he answers 'Extremist? Is it some kind of extraordinary species of mankind hibi?' We see him through her eyes as the initial response of fear created in her mind by the word extremist is replaced by compassion, 'I felt like a mother protecting her wounded son. A flood of tenderness heaved gently in my breast', a feeling that transcends restrictive definitions. Her compassion is not diluted, even when she realizes that he could be a member of the gang who had killed a much loved brother. The effect of the information about his suspected involvement in the killing is immensely disturbing to the young girl and presented vividly, 'the words hit my ears like a thunderbolt. Like a whirlwind they engulfed me and I stood frozen near the door. I could hear the mad rush of my blood racing through my veins.' The murdered brother and the 'extremist' are the same age, almost indistinguishable from each other. They even have similar bullet wounds. The mother's desperate plea when she hears the gunshot that is fired at the 'extremist', mistaking the intended victim of the gunshot for the son she has lost – 'Don't kill him. Don't kill my Kewal. Don't kill my little one... he is my only son.' – underscores the tragedy of the needless loss of a young life. Ajeet Cour does not interpolate comment or criticism into the narrative. It speaks for itself through the voiced consciousness of the young girl and raises questions in the reader's mind about rigid definitions which compartmentalize people, and of the justice meted out with a bullet to those suspected of extremism without confirming their guilt.

## Conclusion

Many of the women who are the protagonists in these writings are compassionate beings, thinking for themselves and speaking for themselves. Very often they are disadvantaged, mired in poverty, leading mundane lives, trapped in an existence that does not afford them any opportunities for advancement. Despite this, the women who emerge from this background are courageous, feisty and



defiant, and challenge in their own inimitable way the patriarchal dispensation that pins them down to a gender identity from which they try to free themselves. They do not always succeed but they sometimes do, reenvisioning their lives bravely tracing their paths that will take them into as yet uncharted territory as do Giribala and the mother in 'Sparrows'.

They see their societies and cultures through eyes not veiled by social conventions and received ways of seeing. They discern the chinks in the armour of moral righteousness – 'the black and white morality', to use Kamala Wijeratne's discerning phrase in 'Death by Drowning' (Sri Lanka, 425-31) – and interrogate the accepted norms of behaviour and belief. These powerless women empower themselves through their strength of belief and principle, even challenging the might of powerful states as does the young Li Xiang.

*Speaking for Myself* is a selection of writings compiled with sensitivity which affords the reader a rich sampling of the writings of Asian women. Its defining feature is its refusal to impose an editorial viewpoint on the reader. The women speak for themselves, articulating their nuanced experiences of need, protest, suffering and the rare moments of happiness. We are afforded a glimpse into their lives as we discern the subtextual threads that run through their writings, and indeed their lives. Although often addressing culturally specific issues the writings reach out beyond Asian readers as we see the deeper dimensions and wider relevance of these questions. They create a redefinition of female selfhood, overturning the image of Asian woman as a construct of patriarchy, not passive and submissive, but strong, energetic and dynamic. The Pakistani poet Kishwar Naheed encapsulates this idea poetically in 'Who Am I?' (384), rebelling against the shackles that attempt to suppress her: 'I am the one you hid beneath/the weight of traditions' and emerging fearless and free. 'For you never knew that light can never fear pitch darkness.' ■

Sarojini Jayaraman, is the author of *Writing That Computers: Re-reading Kaur's 'An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon'*

## I'M A DOG (a true story)

I'm a dog  
not so rare  
a mongrel with mange  
No care no fair  
I wander around  
nose to the ground  
eyes full of sight  
ears full of sound

This neighbourhood  
is a creepy place  
walls are high  
locks are great  
servants are fat  
thin ladies bake  
cops asleep  
thieves awake

Then came the day  
the timing was right  
knife held to a child  
No fight no flight  
a mother's fear  
a woman's fear  
the thief had a hard-on  
I had a beer

Too late to bark  
end of the game  
took a mother's shame  
to keep the hostage safe  
nobody asked  
So I didn't tell  
thief had no name  
had a face, had a smell

by Zymurgy



## THE WEIGHT ON A CONSCIENCE

Ranya Chamalie Jirasinghe

*A Long Hot Day*, by Anne Ranasinghe, English Writers Cooperative of Sri Lanka, 183 pp., Rs.500

Half a century after Anneliese Katz, then a 13-year-old girl, fled from the German town of Essen to England at the outbreak of the second World War to become the only survivor of the Holocaust in her family, a group of students from a school in Cologne faxed her a list of questions. The previous day they had watched a screening of the film, *Visitorina*. The film, directed by one of Germany's foremost documentary directors, Michael Lentz, was based on Anneliese Katz's (now Anne Ranasinghe) childhood in Essen. As their last question to her, the students asked Anne: Why do you want to talk about the past?

In part of her answer to the question, Ranasinghe recounted an episode that took place during the filming of Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*. The film has a section on Chelmno, the Polish village where Nazi administrators killed over 400,000 men, women and children with engine exhaust in specially built lorries. The speed of the killing depended on the way the drivers controlled the engines. Many of the people imprisoned in the lorries had not completely suffocated by the time the driver reached the Ruzchow forest, where they were thrown into pits and burned. Ranasinghe told the children:

Lanzmann had traced one of the drivers who had been in charge of the lorries in Chelmno which were used for gassing people – I told you earlier that my parents died in one of those. Before Lanzmann could interview him the neighbours warned him, so he disappeared, and Lanzmann interviewed the neighbours instead.

He said to a good looking woman: "I wonder whether you know who your neighbor is?"

She said, "He is a very good neighbor."

Lanzmann asked, "Do you know what he did during the war?"

She said, "That doesn't interest me."

Lanzmann said, "He is responsible for the deaths of 400,000 Jews," and she answered with blinking, "Everybody has his own private life."

Anyone who has lived in big city and encountered the anonymity that it allows, knows that the woman's answer,

"Everybody has his own private life," epitomizes her post-modern life and its disinterested approach to the validity of a larger historical reality against a personal truth. In other words, the woman's experience, *her* truth, *her* narrative, *her* personal experience with the lorry driver, in this case his "good neighbourly-ness", subsumed and discounted his role in a historical narrative that is validated by facts, figures and most importantly firsthand accounts (it is not hard to picture this well-groomed woman shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly and saying in response to this paragraph: "That's what they say. They could be lies").

A few years ago, a 23-year-old Sri Lankan student in his first year at a UK university who had come home for his summer holidays contacted me about possible sources for a research paper. He was writing a revisionist history of Hitler's life. That summer, revisionist biographies of Hitler had become one of the hottest controversies in Europe and the US with the release of *The Downfall*, a movie about the last 12 days of Hitler's life. The director, Oliver Hirschbiegel, had based the movie primarily on the memoir by Hitler's secretary, Traudl Junge *Until the Final Hour*. The film won the Hamburg Bambi Prize for the best German film of the year and a Foreign Language film nomination at the Oscars.

The film "humanized" Hitler. It showed a feeble man, kind to his young female secretaries, loving to his German shepherd and full of charm and charisma. It also included most of the main characters in his life such as Eva Braun and the Goebbels, and portrayed each one's heartbreak and pain about the other's decision to commit suicide and their long discussions on how to commit the act. Some viewers of the movie see the depravity behind the entire set-up and the man portrayed. In any case, who *did not know* that Hitler and his officers were human beings? After all, hasn't that always been the real horror behind the Holocaust; that it was ultimately about the level of cruelty that one human being wielded on another, endorsed by a legitimate government?

The critics who opposed the movie took issue not for its portrayal of Hitler as a person but for its focus on aspects in a biography that then de-emphasised the larger impact of the



subject's life on the world around him. To an audience that is well-read, keenly attuned to the nuances behind the events of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, such a movie would have been another opportunity to, indeed, revise, and give depth to their understanding of Hitler. On the other hand to an audience made up of those such as the young Sri Lankan student who had not even read world history in secondary school, the movie provided a foundation for him to believe his own one-dimensional thesis argument that "Hitler was not that bad." An equivalent closer home would be this: 60 years from 1983 a similar student (say a 23 year old Britisher or an American) attempts a revisionist paper on the July riots arguing that the political leaders of the early 30s were human beings. Or, to take it to the lengths that revisionist historians have revised the Holocaust, that the '83 riots were, for instance, a collective conspiracy of the Tamil people to blacken the good name of the Sinhala people and a primarily Sinhalese government.

Yet, as American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. writes in his book, *The Cycles of American History*:

...revisionism is an essential part of the process by which history, through the posing of new problems and the investigation of new possibilities, enlarges its perspectives and enriches its insights.<sup>1</sup>

*A Long Hot Day* in which Ranasinghe has included the Cologne students' questions and her responses to them as well as several other essays, must be placed in this process that Schlesinger describes. In the essential and inevitable revision of narratives, where the distance created by the passage of time makes it difficult to understand and perceive an event and an experience, *A Long Hot Day* documents at first hand, one person's unique experience of a horrifying historical event, its aftermath and her response to her world after that. It becomes a vital publication because, as Dr Lakshmi de Silva writes in the preface, it also includes:

...two substantial essays by Klaus Harpprecht and Professor Leonard Mars. Harpprecht provides a compact, incisive view of the darker events in Sri Lanka from 1959 to 1989, moreover, with the course of her [Ranasinghe's] life and career, while Mars' paper is not only a meticulous and sensitive exploration but a celebration of her poems...

In other words, Ranasinghe's personal accounts are substantiated and authenticated by two scholars through the meticulous research of one and the literary analysis of the other. The book contains several poems, a significant collection at that, as Prof Mars annexes the poems he

examines in the essay at the end of his paper. It also includes several of Ranasinghe's translations of German poems and essays, among them a fascinating account of the life of Oskar Schindler, which she tellingly titles, "The Heroic Non-hero." The book also highlights the uniqueness of Ranasinghe's life. She is the only Jew residing permanently in Sri Lanka. "I landed," she says,

One glorious morning [in 1932] on an almost paradisiacal island that was graced by bright sunlight, a calm blue sea and golden beaches; a landscape of brilliantly covered blossoms, vast stretches of paddy lands, coconut groves, a central hill mass of verdant tea plantations, and a huge variety of trees in infinite shades of green... The immediate post-independence period was rich in excitement and the spirit of adventure.

Over the course of living in Sri Lanka for almost 60 years, she watched one political decision after another drag this "paradisiacal island" into three decades of civil war, several insurgencies and horrendous political violence, leaving her with a set of experiences and perceptions that will never have a parallel in the life of any other Holocaust survivor. Because of her particular experience we read her poems "Auschwitz from Colombo" or "July 1983." Because of her continuous grappling with the loss of her mother tongue to her as her primary means of writing, her own ability to negotiate her way with perfect ease from one social group speaking English to another Sinhala, and her life in a country that bears the consequences of making the language of the majority the official language, she leaves readers acutely aware of the how essential the written word and education are, how language and culture define a person and how easily they are misused.

...it [the Holocaust] also raises questions which are relevant to those of us involved in writing or in the study of literary education and the values it inculcates. After all, the merciless barbarism for which the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be remembered sprang from countries that boasted of a great cultural heritage and Christian civilization. ...

...under Nazism language lost its meaning where words were misused, twisted and cheapened till the old connotations were destroyed. There was a time when it was assumed that a classical education conferred not only refinement of judgement but also greater understanding and tolerance of the human condition. But actually no evidence has been found to substantiate this. On the contrary there were instances in Nazi Europe where institutions of higher learning welcomed the monstrous new regime...



Throughout the book, Ranasinghe documents her experiences and attempts to lessen the burden on her conscience. Because, as she says:

An awareness of the unpredictability of the human conduct should perhaps infuse our writing, with a sense of urgency to counter the possibility of ever increasing darkness. Even here, on the other side of the world from Hitler's rampage we have had our own experiences to lend substance to these fears.

Behind this urgency to document in order to counter is the question that permeates this book:

How can we teach the generations to come to feel deeply about those deaths that the world was powerless to prevent or to be alert to the deaths that can be prevented today, that we can put an end to?

Is it possible to hope that if given clear, substantiated accounts by a holocaust victim or a survivor that the German woman speaking to Lanzmann 50 years later or the 23 year old Sri Lankan student writing a revisionist history of Hitler will be able to empathize and feel the pain behind the experience? And is it possible to hope that having had that refinement of experience through learning from a historical event that those two people and those of their generation would then be able to transfer that learning and stand up against the re-occurrence of a range of similar events were they to take place in their own countries: in prisons, in children's' homes, in refugees camps, in a neighbour's backyard?

In 1983 Ranasinghe returned to Essen for the first time since she fled the village in 1938. She returned again in 1986, accompanying Michael Lentz and his film crew. She says:

When a Gallup poll questioned people [in Essen] at random (during the making of my film) as to what had happened to their erstwhile Jewish fellow citizens and taped their answers, some said they didn't know where. And some said the Jews had 'gone away', but they didn't know where. And some laughed and said most of them were gassed and went up in smoke. I have the tape. It is not an invented story. Even the laugh.

The burden on the conscience of a Ranasinghe is not only the burden to tell the experience, but also the far heavier knowledge that came to Ranasinghe on her visit to Germany in 1986:

I felt that there had been little change in the behaviour and attitude of the German people since I left 44 years earlier.

The heaviest burden on anyone's conscience, in this case the "Lingering Weight on Germany's Conscience" as she titles the questions and her answers to the students in Cologne, is possibly the realization that despite an experience and event of the magnitude of the Holocaust, governments and people in Rwanda, or in Colombo, or in Essen may continue to perpetrate crimes of different degrees, driven possibly by similar intent. She says in her poem "July 1983":

Forty years later  
Once more there is burning,  
The night sky hunched, violent and abused

And I—though related  
Only by marriage—  
Feel myself both victim and accused ...

Removed by time, distance, and living in a completely different socio-political environment, compounded by ignorance, many young people cannot comprehend the context that led to the Holocaust. What else would make a German reporter, apart from a warped sense of humour, ask Ranasinghe why her father (and the other Jews) did not defend themselves? And, on a similar note, isn't it possible that several decades into the future, living in a more equitable Sri Lankan society that a naive teenager would ask a parent why the Tamil people didn't call in the police when the mobs attacked their homes in July '83? Looking to a future such as this, having encountered it in 1986, Ranasinghe does the only thing left to do. She talks about the past and the present.

Ranasinghe reports events, on the surface as different from one another as *A Long Hot Day* when the Reserve Police Battalion 101, the German Order Police that operated in Poland, rounded up Jews and shot them in the head in the Josefow marketplace, and the bullock yoked to the cart fell on the road and couldn't rise in spite of the stick: "Plead Mercy—*Sabbu Sathu Bhavanti Sukhi Taha.*"

She writes "what has to be said." ■

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, 1986, 165.

Ms. Jirasinghe is a Sri Lankan writer



## IN MEMORIAM

### THE EVA I KNEW...

#### A Woman for All Seasons

Eva Ranaweera was a many faceted woman journalist, bilingual writer, poet, activist and feminist. Over and above all these, she was a true friend and colleague, with an intelligence, sincerity and charm that over rode the many slings and arrows that fortune dealt her through her life.

As director of the NGO, Voice of Women she worked single handedly producing the tri-monthly journal *Voice of Women* in English, *Kantha Handa* in Sinhala and *Penin Kural* in Tamil. She wrote most of their contents, at times identifying men and women relevant to her theme and deeply concerned about it, to contribute. She thought about the journal, dreamed about it and planned it months ahead, seeking current and relevant topics. At the time of her death she was preparing for a journal on *The Displaced* which she explained will not only be about women displaced by the conflict, but about women displaced through tradition and convention in the Sri Lankan content.

She planned workshops, training programmes, and art classes on feminist themes. Her end of the year calendar was a mosaic of drawings on feminist themes by the young people who attended the art classes she organized. There were occasions when she travelled to distant rural areas – amid much discomfort and trouble, often managing with her own finances to bring to rural women the idea of gender, women's development and the need for them to move away from their kitchens to the wider world. She had many critics, but she forged ahead with her mission.



As a journalist too she always sought the unusual, the unconventional and lived by those standards despite public opinion. She read avidly and was a collector of books. Her knowledge and love for her own language, Sinhala, lasted throughout her life, thought, she worked and wrote mainly

in English. Her study at her home in Ragama has publications in both languages and valuable classical editions. Her knowledge of writers and writing was always at her finger tips. I remember with gratitude the numerous times she helped me with her knowledge of these, willingly and with infinite patience.

Her social consciousness was clear in her work as a journalist which she extended in later years to her writings in *Kantha Handa*. She picked on themes and topics crucial to the women of this country with unerring accuracy. War and gender, AIDS,

displacement, domestic violence, sexual abuse, children, family, women and transport were some of the areas she explored in her writings.

The most outstanding quality of her life was her own special view of the world and its happenings. In this, as in many things in her life, she lived to the fullest, generous to a fault and a friend for life. ■

*Vijita Fernando*

The SSA mourns the loss of Eva Ranaweera who all her life was associated with progressive movements. Before joining *Voice of Women*, she had been in Cairo, Egypt for a decade in the Secretariat of the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AAPSO). There she interacted with liberation organizations and Third World leaders. Previously in Sri Lanka she was close to the Left movement and was active in the Ceylon Peace Council and the local Afro-Asian Solidarity Association. Her death leaves a void in the feminist and left movements.



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## IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

Rohini Hensman

My mother Pauline Hensman, born Pauline Swan on 1 December 1922 in Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka), died peacefully on 21 May 2010 in London. She was the daughter of Erin Swan and James Swan, who worked his way up from the lowest grade to become a foreman in the railway workshop at Maradana. She had childhood memories of creeping through the fence with her elder sister Rosine and younger brother Edward to get to the office of the workshop, in order to dance and sing to the amused clerical staff in return for paper and pencils. She also had memories of the tramway strike of 1929, which was supported by the railway workers. According to her, when the employers attempted to break the strike using British management staff to drive the trams, the workers retaliated by throwing buckets of nightsoil at them. I have no idea whether this is an accurate recollection or not, given that she would have been just six years old at the time, but what was undeniable was her glee at the discomfiture of the colonial bosses at this unusual form of industrial action! On another occasion, when her mother was attacked with a knife by a drunk and violent man whose wife she had befriended, Pauline bit him so hard that he was forced to back off. My grandmother lost a couple of teeth in that encounter, so one can imagine what might have happened if her daughter had not come to the rescue!

These stories from my mother's childhood in many ways foreshadow the adult she was to become. The courage and resourcefulness that impelled her to tackle a violent man who was threatening to kill her mother stayed with her all her life. It was evident, for example, when she asked one of her nephews to drive her around war-ravaged Jaffna in the mid-1980s on the back of his motorbike, so that she could see the situation for herself and report back to the South and to the rest of the world. And the liberation theology that later guided her ethical and political engagement with the world was surely influenced by her spontaneous identification with the oppressed: women, racial/ethnic and religious minorities, colonised peoples, exploited workers, and above all, children.

This is what brought her and Dick Hensman together. When they fell in love with each other, some of his Tamil relations as well as some of her Burgher relations objected to their engagement, but the young people refused to budge, and got married on 10 April 1947. I was born in 1948, my brother Jim in 1950, while Savi, the youngest, was born in 1962.

Their long and eventful life together included moving to Britain after the 1958 riots, back to Sri Lanka in 1961, back to Britain in 1964, and back to Sri Lanka in 1981. In the 1950s and 1960s, she worked with him to bring out *Community* magazine, write *The Better Way to English*, and run the Community Institute. Together they were part of the Jubilee Group in London, and went on speaking tours of the US. Her love for him survived his death in 2008: her last wish was to die at home in the room she had shared with him for so many years.

Another interest that emerged in Pauline's childhood interactions with younger cousins and developed into a lifelong passion was teaching. Her long career as an English teacher, which started straight after she received her degree in Colombo and went on after she retired, spanned two countries (Sri Lanka and Britain), children whose mother-tongue was English and those who hardly knew any English to begin with, and paid as well as unpaid work. Most strikingly, it spanned the entire spectrum from highly intelligent and articulate A-level students at Bishops College, Colombo, who went on to become brilliant women, to primary school children with special needs from deprived backgrounds in London. She taught all of them with the same dedication, and was rewarded with the love and gratitude of her pupils. The frequent moves between different countries and schools could easily have thrown her chosen profession off course, but she always found her feet and continued with her work, even under the most difficult circumstances. And she managed to combine this work with spending time with her children and running a household: other members of the family did their part, but she was undoubtedly the manager!



She did not call herself a feminist until much later in life, but she always believed in the equality of women with men, girls with boys. In her own practice she demonstrated the possibility of combining employment with a family, and of being a strong, independent woman while being loving and caring at the same time.

After her retirement, my parents returned to the same neighbourhood from which they had been displaced by the 1958 riots, much to the joy of neighbours who had missed them during their long absence. Foremost among these was Menike, who was like a sister to Pauline, and her son Nimal. After his mother's death in 1988, Nimal regarded them as his adopted parents. Pauline resumed her role as a healer and teacher in the neighbourhood, meticulously innovating materials and methods to teach English to both young adults and schoolchildren. She participated in the Writers' Workshop (also known as the Wadiya Group) in Colombo as a 'supervisor', providing advice and encouragement to its members.

Much of her writing dates from this period when she had more leisure. Most of her papers are theological, but her theology was anything but 'pie in the sky', engaging with issues of malnutrition, poverty, exploitation and dispossession, militarism, patriarchy, violence against women and women's liberation, struggles for justice and equality, and resistance to growing state repression and violence in Sri Lanka. Nor did her faith prevent her from appreciating emancipatory interpretations of other faiths and non-religious philosophies. In 1987 she wrote words that have a resonance even today: 'If we love our neighbours as ourselves, can we forsake them when they are arrested and become political prisoners without access to a just trial, and subjected to torture? Or can we ignore them when they are

hungry and thirsty, malnourished and sick in body, mind and spirit, in refugee camps here and abroad, or in army camps anywhere in the island?'

She called for civil disobedience against an authoritarian and homicidal state. Yet in September 1989, when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam killed Rajani Thiranagama, a Tamil doctor, lecturer, feminist and founding member of University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), she was equally passionate in her denunciation of 'those who meticulously planned and executed her murder,' calling on people in Sri Lanka to attend the Peace March planned for the 60<sup>th</sup> day after her death, and on the diaspora to 'organise and work for the kind of society for which Rajani gave her life'. And she continued to support the work of the surviving members of UTHR(J).

My mother wrote everything out by hand: she never typed. So we are indebted to my father for collecting her writings together, typing them out, and getting them published in a book, *To Mercy, Peace and Love: Reflections and Notes on Social Transformation and Theology*, as a present for her 61<sup>st</sup> birthday.

During a visit to London in 2006, she contracted a life-threatening illness which left her housebound and unable to travel. Yet she, and my father until his death in 2008, continued to provide a centre drawing together their extended family and close friends. The large number of people who remember her with love and respect are living testimony to the ways in which she influenced so many lives in a positive way. She wrote in the Preface to her book, 'I passionately believe in the causes I have been espousing, and perhaps this book will be at work when I no longer am.' It is up to us to preserve that legacy. ■

New from the **SSA**

## PERPETUAL FERMENT

Popular Revolts in Sri Lanka  
in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

by

**Kumari Jayawardena**



## ON THE BEACH

“Whom to take and whom to leave.  
Heartbreaking. Agonizing.”  
Those were his words.

He has to go, complete his mission  
not remain behind taking only those  
whom he feels, will live

The others, left behind with dwindling  
breath, without food, without water  
nothing to assuage the cringing, cramping  
pangs of hunger or that parching thirst.  
Let Death be speedy and not linger.  
Let Death be merciful.

For whom will there be resurrection?

Lying prone on the shore strewn  
with the debris of what's left  
of life with glazing eyes, confront  
that vast expanse of shimmering blue,  
that brine filled ocean on which they made  
that hope-filled journey escaping  
through the wilderness, reptile infested  
of thorn snarled rutty routes  
Where were the locusts and the manna,  
from heaven to feed their starving  
hearts in that hazardous exodus?

“Whom to take, whom to leave behind.”

Just this one life. One brief lifetime  
Unrecorded histories and then is nothing left  
but to let go of this last breath.  
There are parallels.  
Dunkirk perhaps is one.  
Remember my friend, Frank Coplestone  
telling me his story as we stood on that hill

beside an ancient fortress in Fowey, a soldier  
who survived the holocaust of the Second  
world war. Left on the beach.  
Waiting for the boats. Thousands of troops  
Retreating. Shells falling all around  
but not as the gentle rain from heaven  
bombarding that terrain, shattering  
the carapace of earth, the Vulnerable  
flesh turtle-squirming, upturned,  
bleeds to death.

In the here and now do these lost  
souls prepare on a new embarkation  
for the next lap of their journey before  
the final haven's reached?

There's no one here to hold a chalice  
to the lips, no one to catch within  
the net the wounded shoal of words,  
pleas, entreaties, hopeless cries silenced  
with Death's hands placed against  
the mouths grimacing twist.

The phantom snow goose of a childhood's  
tale flies across a peerless sky  
in memory.

The shores through time are empty,  
desolate.

Where are those boats,  
mere planks of rotting wood  
the ships, wrecked hulks?

“Whom to take, whom to leave behind.”  
The unanswered question.

*Jean Arasanayagam*